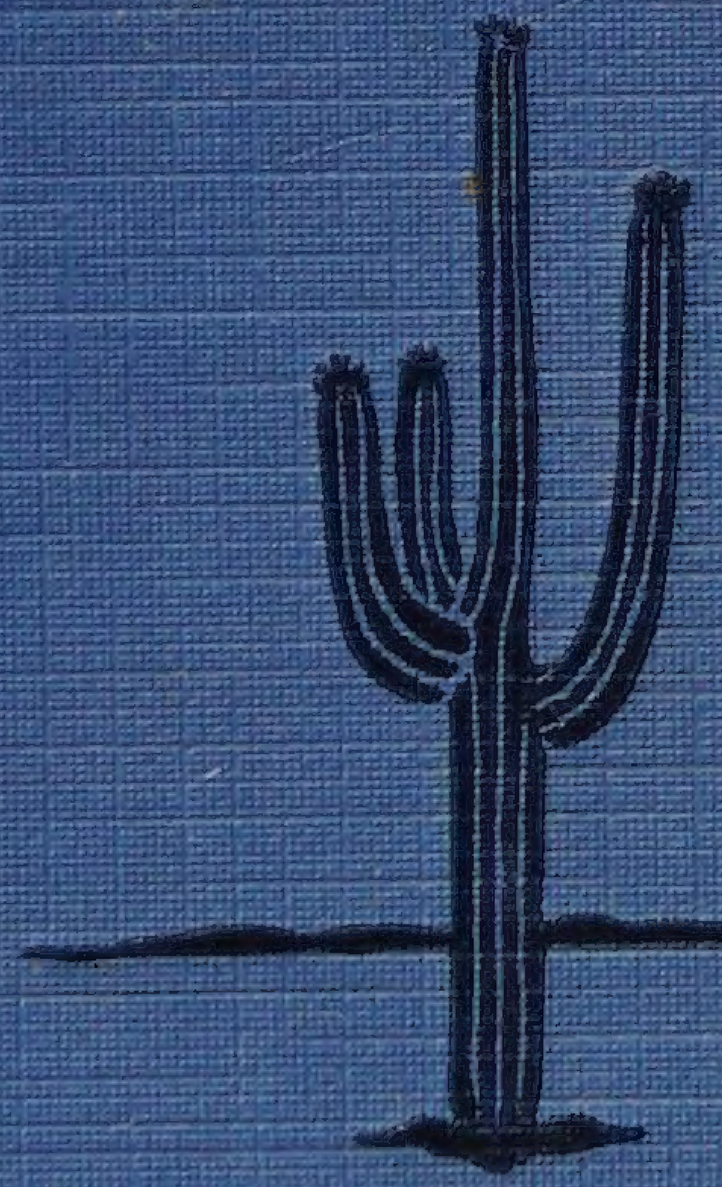
SENTINEL OF THE DESERT



JACKSON GREGORY

SENTINEL OF THE DESERT

Read may 15-28 by H. L. Moore

SENTINEL OF THE DESERT

BY

JACKSON GREGORY

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THE EVERLASTING WHISPER,
EMERALD TRAILS,
MAN TO MAN, ETC.

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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Published, February, 1929
Second printing, April, 1929

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

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SENTINEL OF THE DESERT

CHAPTER I

CAPTAIN COLORADO PRESENTS HIMSELF

In Nacional, the little south-western border town there is a certain place—call it inn, roadhouse, gambling palace, merely saloon, or what you will—that is remarkably widely known. Its reputation is sinister; it could exist nowhere on earth save in such a town as Nacional. A mere three hundred and fifty yards south of the international boundary line, which is to say securely rooted in old Mexico, it stands somewhat withdrawn from the village itself, half smothered in its own ancient shade trees. It is known as the Hacienda Escondida—the Hidden Hacienda.

In its time this was once the *residencia* of a very fine, very wealthy Spanish gentleman, Señor Inocente Castañares. He was addicted, however, to wine and cards, and unfortunately indulged in the two together. And so, in the ripeness of time, he was borne along to the sweeping loss inevitable to such a man at such a time and place; and the fine old home was cast for a new, highly incongruous and altogether evil rôle. Hither one fine night in the early springtime, riding under a full moon which picked out bits of silvered finery upon his own person and in his horse's fittings, came a stranger to Nacional.

He struck into the straggling fringes of the village from the south, turned into a crooked roadway bearing to the left and so came presently, with not the slightest difficulty, to the place which he sought. There was no likelihood

of missing the Hacienda Escondida. It alone of all buildings hereabouts was shut off from the world by noble old gardens and a high wall of rock and adobe; it alone still made its claim upon grandeur and seemed to hark back to the régime of Western feudalism. Seen for the first time as the stranger saw it now, under a bright globed moon in the full flood of springtime, with the sweet scent of many blossoms lying soft upon the warm night air, with the sturdy old walls gleaming white through the jungle-thick olives and oranges and pepper-trees, with a mellow glow of light at an open window, it was a place of peculiar, intriguing charm. A faint wisp of music, muted violins, seemed to mingle with the fragrance of clove pinks and Spanish roses. The stranger drew rein at a gateway in the adobe wall; a lantern swung from an overhead cross-beam and revealed the slouching figure of a man who might have been there by chance, or who might have some business there. At any rate, he stepped out into the middle of the roadway; a short man, the moonlight made a grotesquely elongated shadow of him, crowning it with a hat like a steeple.

"*Buenas tardes, señor,*" he offered languidly.

The other returned his greeting pleasantly. They spoke a few words in the lazy Spanish of Mexico. Two Mexicans, any one would have said who chanced to hear them. The gate-keeper had not the slightest suspicion that he had not been chatting with a fellow-countryman; he directed the newcomer to the stables and fell to yawning and stretching and admiring the moon.

The stranger, passing in through the gate, turned into the bridle-path and jogged along to the stable. A peon heard him coming and came out of the shadow, touching a tall hat. A couple of coins were dropped into a dirty palm; the stable boy, holding them out to the moon,

became effusive, snatching off his hat, recognizing one of the Great Ones of the Earth. *"Si, señor; si, señor; si, señor!"* he kept ejaculating as he had his orders. The horse was to have the best there was; without doubt. What a beauty! It was to be unsaddled only to be rubbed down and groomed thoroughly, then resaddled in readiness for the señor's instant departure; kept saddled, if necessary, all night long. A clean stall; of course! Only the cleanest stall, the freshest water, the best of grain for a horse like that. And things were not to be disturbed; oh, that was understood. The rifle, for instance, slung to the saddle; it was to remain there. And it was well to understand that it was loaded. But, of course, and why not! What was a rifle but an old stick if not loaded? And now let us see that stall; just where located. Here is one that will do nicely; close by the wide open back door. And here, by the way, was the third coin which went with the two others; it might be lonely without them. Oh, *sin duda,* a fine gentleman who rode a fine horse—a country gentleman with great estates and an enormous vassalage, to be sure. Mexican, of course. Not to judge by the costume, the gigantic sombrero of the south, the short jacket, ornate with gold braid, the boots and spurs, the argent touches of splendor, the belt and holster in rich leather with gold flashes brightening it, the mother-of-pearl haft of a knife; no, one should not judge by such things, which could be put on and taken off. By the voice, rather, and its inflection and the easy flow of idiom. One of the compatriots, surely, of whom all good peons should be so richly proud.

"You have not been here before, I think, señor? *Bueno;* then I am going to tell you. You will not enter by the door that is open yonder; that one leads to the common bar, to the place where any one, men like me,

even, can go and have their liquor and a game. But you, señor, will go to the great front doors yonder; where the iron lantern hangs. That is where the fine gentlemen go."

The stranger said a quiet "*Gracias, amigo,*" and moved away through the shadows of the big pepper-trees. A Mexican gentleman, surely. But tall for a Mexican, who for the most part are a people of no great stature. Tall and lean; swift, now; going like a shadow among other shadows. A cape-like cloak hung from his shoulders; he drew it about him, enwrapping himself in its loose folds, looking the taller and leaner for doing so.

Having received his directions, he paid not the slightest attention to them. He did glance at the nobler doors set deep in the massive wall where the iron lantern was, but it was to the lesser open door that he elected to turn. He pulled his hat forward and went in. Here was a long, bare room, with a cheap bar at one side, with a scattering of round tables upon the sanded floor, with coal-oil lamps burning smokily. There were a dozen or so men in the place, ragged fellows and not over-clean; the lowest of the low class infesting the border towns, making the air reek with garlicky breaths and cheap cigarettes and the foulest of liquors. Some played at cards; most were merely idle and had nothing better now to do than stare; one amused himself with a guitar, plucking at it dreamily. The stranger went straight-way to the bar but did not ask for a drink. Rather he inquired for one whom he named "El Topo"—the Mole.

"You have come in at the wrong door, señor," the bar-tender informed him respectfully. And, as the stable hand had done before, he indicated the more imposing entrance. "He is to be found in the Rooms."

"You mean I must go outside again and make a second

entrance into the house? Why not that door yonder at the far end of this room?"

"It is kept locked," said the bar-tender.

The stranger nodded.

"Thanks. It is as well to know all these things. And the 'Rooms,' as you call them?"

"It is there that El Topo is to be found. Also, if you seek it, señor, richer entertainment and better liquors."

The stranger passed out and went now to the wide doors under the iron lantern. These doors stood closed, sturdy ancient panels of the soundest and thickest of oak, strapped across with iron. Here it was necessary to set a heavy brass knocker clanging; a key grated in a lock, key of other days, a foot long; a panel swung back silently and the stranger found himself looking into a small ante-room and into the face of El Topo himself.

A fat, gross, flabby man of many breeds, Indian predominating while something about him was insistently Oriental, the man's outstanding peculiarity was his eyes. They were very small, very round, very close together, separated, in fact, by a mere button of a nose; and so heavy and profuse were his eyebrows that the eyes were only bright points of jet seen through the tangle. His face was clean shaven, his head quite bald. The mouth was out of proportion to his large, fat face, as, in fact, were eyes and nose, it being curiously small and round and thick-lipped.

"El Topo?" queried the stranger.

El Topo was in no haste to answer. His one concern for the moment appeared to be a detailed study of this newcomer. At last he spoke, his voice sharp and quick, oddly metallic.

"I have another name which is for the service of strangers."

The other shrugged indifferently.

"Don't be afraid of my wishing to grow familiar with you, *hombre*. I have no such intention. Finding my path leading me through Nacional, I present myself before you for two reasons. One is to deliver a message to El Topo; the other is to seek entertainment for myself."

"Well, then, I am the man you want. And the message?"

"It is from a man you have not seen for several months; a man named Chavez, nicknamed Ardilla. Chavez, the Squirrel."

"Well? What of that one?" demanded El Topo, swifter and more metallic than before. "The message?"

"That he is dead. That you are a fat fool, and that a man named Blondino is a liar. And now that I have kept my word to this Squirrel of yours and borne you his anathemas, perhaps you will throw the door wide? With your sweet permission, I'd like to emulate my horse."

"Now may the devil fry me in hog-fat!" cried El Topo, his flabby face reddening, his eyes all a-flicker. "What is this? Your horse—"

"I trust is by now eating and drinking. Do you invite me in?"

"But—but, señor"—and a vague hint of dawning respect was in the sharp voice—"you say you bring a message from a man, that he is dead! How can a thing like that be?"

The tall man shrugged impatiently.

"Am I to believe that this Chavez spoke truly, naming you a fat fool, then? He chatted with me before he pulled the knife out; after that he died. Cursing you, mind you; you and another whom he called Blondino. Naming this other, this Blondino, as I have told you, a

liar; because it appears that Señor Blondino had sworn on the holy name of the Sainted Virgin to kill this same Chavez; and behold Chavez triumphantly dead to cheat him and brand him a windy-mouthed braggart."

El Topo, plainly not liking the sound of all this, was crossing himself fervently.

"Where was this? And when, señor?"

"A few weeks since; a short distance from Acapulco. If you want all the details you may go there and find out. Oh yes; there was one thing; Chavez thought that the fellow Blondino might consider this interesting, perhaps important: it is that Chavez, departing this world, had made his pretty arrangements that Señor Blondino follow him shortly."

El Topo laughed now. Curses from a dead man were one thing; mere threats of physical violence were quite another. Especially, too, did these promises of early death appear to be exclusively meant for one Blondino.

"So the Squirrel names me a fool, and is dead! While I am alive; well, that satisfies me, señor. And he has made his arrangements for the death of Victor Blondino?" He shrugged fatly.

"Perhaps now, *hombre,* you will invite me to come in?"

Twice that *hombre,* always offensive when used as the stranger used the word. El Topo pursed his small red mouth.

"There is something you want, then?"

"Shall I tell you twice how I would follow the good example of my horse? Afterward, perhaps, there will be some slight amusement offered? Monte? A game at dice? A wheel or a deck of cards?"

El Topo stood aside, and the tall man came forward into the little ante-room. It was dimly lighted by one

coal-oil lamp suspended from a black beam across the ceiling; a polished, nickle-plated (or was it silver-plated?) lamp with an azure silken shade. The floor was carpeted; the bench and two chairs were dignified ancient cronies, heavy walnut of an older day.

"You have not been here before, señor?" El Topo would have given much to have been able to say "*hombre*" as the other did, but was afraid to take liberties. A man cloaked thus, hatted so that there was nothing to be made of him, speaking with such an assurance of arrogance, remained a mystery; in such a mystery was at least a hint of something sinister.

"Yet," continued El Topo, "you would perhaps know of certain customs here? From Chavez himself or another? How this remains the private home of a very fine gentleman, whose major-domo and nothing else I am, the Señor Inocente Castañares. How he receives here only his friends. How it would be necessary to present a name and ask if Señor Castañares could spare a few moments to an old friend."

"*Bueno*," said the other, speaking like a man who had visited many queer places, each with its own customs. "For a man to give himself a name is always easy; there are so many to choose among. You will inform Señor Castañares, then, that there is one at his door who would willingly pay his respects; and for a name you will give him this one, which at some times and in certain quarters has commanded respect: *El Capitan Gabilan*. You can remember that, I think. Eh? Or, let us say, *El Gabilan Colorado*. Or, more simply yet, though in English, plain Captain Hawk."

El Topo drew back swiftly. It was exactly as though he dodged a blow. Of a sudden he found himself standing much too close to the other man. A queer look

leaped up into his little ferrety eyes under the tangle of brows; a look in which amazement certainly was, fear perhaps.

"This way, *Capitan*," he said hastily, and threw wide open a door.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN OF MANY SCARS

To cross the threshold here was to quit the sordid precincts of the border town in the year of grace 1929, and at one step to turn back into the spacious times of New Spain of a full hundred years ago. It would seem that the sturdy walls had stood as impassable barriers against the inroad of Time and his henchman Progress. Ancient Spanish furniture, severe, even stately in black walnut; silver candlesticks; a couple of oil-paintings, conquistadores, these, elegant gentlemen of swords and ruffles; deeply recessed windows forming hidden window seats in the thick earthen walls that were made into secret shadowy places by curtains which fell in loose folds to the Turkey-carpeted floor. That whisper again, rather more insistent here, of muted violins.

All that was merely the first impression. And this was because the room itself and the room beyond, on which it opened through wide doors, had a more marked individuality than any of the men amusing themselves here; they were of the present and of the border, alike only in the two essentials to be found in habitual visitors to the Hacienda Escondida—they were without neither money nor recklessness. There were seven of these men; four at a table playing cards, three at another table dicing. Of this number, five obviously had come down across the border from the American side, a couple of them looking to be prosperous business men, the others a miner, perhaps, and two ranchers. Thus tailor-made

suits elbowed it with the more picturesque if more indifferent garb of desert men. Then there were two Mexicans, dark, small, true gamblers with deft, alert hands. On a table, offering themselves freely, stood decanters of whisky, bottles of wine, boxes of cigarettes and cigars.

The men already in the room had chiefly suspended their play to glance casually at the newcomer. He removed his hat now, impelled to do so, not because of the company into which he came, but rather by the very atmosphere of the place. One did not wear his hat in a house like this one. But evidently his face meant nothing to any that looked up at it; they turned away indifferently as from any stranger.

Not so El Topo. Having his first opportunity to study this man's features, he was all eyes. Round, glinting, flickering eyes, furtive behind their barricades. Eyes which grew rounder as it dawned on El Topo for the first time that this man, despite his fluency in El Topo's own liquid tongue, was no blood compatriot of his. Was it true, then, that this was El Gabilan Colorado? But the man was not Mexican! A Westerner, yes; but of Latin blood assuredly not. A Texan? Perhaps that; El Topo knew the border types, and here was one to fit nicely into a certain characteristic Texas mold. In any case, fully Anglo-Saxon blooded. A shock of close-cut, dull, dark red hair, a high white forehead; below the white forehead a face almost as dark as any Mexican's, yet clearly the deeper shade here was the work of the Southern sun, not the implication of Southern blood; a vigorous, healthy tan; like bronze. This one the Red Hawk? More keenly than ever did El Topo stare. Well, then, there was the look of a hawk in this fellow! The piercing eyes, untamed, wild eyes, quick

with fire and the same sort of pride which held the head so high; the high-bridged nose; the lean cheeks making the head from chin to crown look long. Predatory? Perhaps.

"This way, then, señor," said El Topo quickly, bethinking himself as he felt the fierce eyes turned suddenly upon him. "If you will follow me? *Gracias, señor.*"

He hurriedly led the way across the room and to a little door behind yellow curtains in a corner. He brushed the curtains aside to knock; a man's voice, very gentle and musical, commanded pleasantly: "*Entra.*" El Topo threw the door open and kept his place at one side, making no move to pass, but saying gravely:

"Señor Castañares, here is one who would pay his respects. He is, of course, a friend. You will remember him. He is—he will remind you who he is—"

The stranger stepped swiftly through the door, which he closed after him, shutting it in El Topo's fat face.

A single taper, freshly lighted, in a tall candlestick mingled its dim illumination here with the mellow moonlight which entered through two iron-grilled windows; these windows looked out upon the flowery inner court, and the moon just managed to peep through. Confronting the newcomer stood Castañares, where he had evidently risen but now from a chair drawn up to a small table.

A glance was enough to tell this. Yet there were other glances, quick and keen and perhaps suspicious, sent darting everywhere. There was a faint sound as of high heels clicking; a little shadow, scarcely more, slipped across the patio and was lost in the shrubbery. Some one, a woman, had been here with Castañares? Well, she was gone now.

The room was not large. Three easy chairs only,

the little table, a sofa in a corner under a window, a few books. On the wall one painting. It was life-sized and life-like. A very beautiful young woman, patrician, subtly haughty, bending haunting, languorous eyes upon the cluster of red roses held in a listless hand. Under the picture was a marble-topped stand; on the stand a vase of fresh, fragrant red roses; it was easy to dream that the lady in the painting had but just now stooped and taken her own flowers from the vase.

And now, all this having been taken in in the second glance, for Señor Inocente Castañares himself. Like his own voice which had invited entrance, he was a quiet, gentle man, courteous and smiling and affable. Not over fifty, well dressed all in black, without beard or mustache, but with a notable head of fine black hair. The full eyes were grave and gave the impression that the man was but half-aroused from some deep meditation; the smile which touched the clean line of the lips made but a faint hint of light in them.

A very handsome man— Then, as he put his head back a little and slightly turned, the full light of the solitary candle shone upon a face horribly seamed with scars. Across the forehead, over the right eye and down to the cheek ran a dark line; it was crossed by another just below the cheekbone; still another, one end lost in the thick black mane, ran close to the left temple and to the jaw. Scars enough to set any man wondering first how they had been received and, above that, how any man could have lived to carry them on through the years.

Castañares put out his hand—there was a scar running across it from the base of the little finger to the base of the thumb, and the thumb itself was gone—saying quietly:

"You are welcome, señor; my poor house is honored. A friend? You will forgive me for not remembering? It is my one great sorrow, señor, that my memory is of the poorest. I am always forgetting things."

He had a shrug for answer. Then a cool rejoinder:

"We have never seen each other before, and you know it. My name, however, to complete El Topo's absurd introduction, is Hawk. Julian Hawk."

Castañares looked a trifle confused. Musingly he repeated the name.

"Señor Hawk. Julian Hawk. Ah! But you are American, then, señor? From your speech one would judge otherwise. And not an old friend of mine? Well, well; the misfortune is mine." He sighed; the hand which he had offered, and which had been ignored, dropped to his side. "May I ask, then, and not be thought uncivil, the nature of the errand which gives me the honor, señor?"

"For one thing, I brought a message—"

In a flash Castañares' eyes brightened. He exclaimed eagerly:

"You have a message for me! I have been expecting it all day long, Señor Hawk. You come from—*her!* You bring me word from *Mi Señora!* She is returning? Soon?"

"My message was for El Topo—through him for Victor Blondino—not for you," said Captain Hawk curtly.

"Yes, yes!" agreed the other, that bright look still shining in his eyes. "But it concerned her, did it not?"

A pair of thin, dark brows shot up sharply. Something of both curiosity and contempt looked out of the bold eyes.

"I do not even guess to whom you refer—"

"Why, to her!" He flung out an arm dramatically, indicating the painted lady of the red roses. "*Mi Señora.* You see, señor, I am expecting her; each hour, each moment now, I expect her to return. And you brought no message?"

Julian Hawk stared coldly a moment; then muttered a curt "No." Of a sudden he understood; Castañares of the handsome, sad, scarred face, was a little mad.

The short-lived brightness faded out of the dark eyes, some quickened hope dying swiftly, so hard and crisp and curt was that emphatic "No." A wistful look followed; Castañares sighed, put his hand to his forehead, and pressed his hair back; then with a little gesture he turned and smiled, saying:

"You will pardon me again, señor; for a moment I was confused. I spoke of matters which, of course, you could not understand. But that is past. It remains that I am deeply appreciative of the honor you do me in visiting me. It grows late, so of course you will spend the night? And perhaps you have not even dined? Ah!" And he hastened to a bell cord at the side of a door and pulled it vigorously. "First you will want to go to your room; I see that you have been riding. Later on we shall chat, eh? *Muchacho,*" he turned to say to the young Indian boy who came in answer to the bell, "this gentleman is my guest. You will show him to his room. And you will tell the cook, too; and command some of my best wine."

He stepped back, bowing and smiling. Julian Hawk stared at him a moment, then shrugged, turned on his heel, and strode along after the Indian. Their way led out into the patio, across and along a corridor; here they came to a small bedroom, where already a couple of candles were burning. On a washstand were pitcher,

bowl, and towels. Through a single window the moonlight streamed in, slipping through the customary iron bars. Julian Hawk went in, flipping the boy a coin, which was caught deftly. And now again he confronted El Topo, who, it would seem, had come here himself to light the candles and see that all was well.

And for still another purpose was El Topo here.

"Chavez, the Squirrel that is now dead, told you much," he said bluntly. "Among other things, no doubt, that money buys food and drink and the rest here at Hacienda Escondida?"

As he had flung the Indian a coin, so now did Julian Hawk toss a buckskin pouch across the room to be caught by the fat El Topo, proving himself quite as agile as the Indian.

"Take out what goes to the house and a few pesos for yourself, *hombre*," he was told carelessly.

"You know how much money is here?" demanded El Topo quickly.

"Tell me of Castañares yonder. He is mad?"

"He is not quite like other men," conceded El Topo.

"He asks for his '*Señora.*' What of her?"

"Dead, as every one knows. Dead a dozen years or more."

"Those scars about his head? What of them?"

El Topo shrugged and moved toward the door.

"The woman who was with him just now? The one who slipped out as I went in?"

But El Topo was gone, closing the door after him.

The individual who styled himself variously El Capitan Gabilan, Julian Hawk, or the Red Captain, divested himself of his cloak, rolled up his sleeves, and cleansed himself at the washstand. He stood so that at no time did he turn his back toward the window. His ever-

watchful regard was trained upon it most of the while. His was the hard, set face in which little muscles do not ripple idly to advise the world in general what his thoughts may be. If he marked the iron bars he must, without doubt, be used to such things, since he had ridden from the South where in all the old homes gratings like these were a commonplace. Through the years they had served a dual purpose: they excluded thieves, and they immured and held back in safety the master's household. He might sleep in peace knowing that, with the big keys turned in all the doors, none of the more adventurous of his tribe could sally forth. If he meant to keep an eye on a son who was beginning to run wild, he made sure of him thus. If there were a little daughter whom the moon tempted, thus he set bars against the moon. A house like this stood ready to play the rôle of fortress—or prison—or trap.

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL OF THE HACIENDA

A RIPPLE of excitement ran through the old Hacienda Escondida. It quickened voices, put a lively, eager light into eyes. Something out of the ordinary had happened, or was about to happen. Perhaps both. That which had occurred, whatever it might be, promised some further unusual development.

Julian Hawk, returning to the large main room by way of the patio, paused at the door and stood a moment looking about him. Those men who half an hour earlier had been busied at cards and dice were still at their tables, occupied with their gaming. No one so much as looked up as he entered; the door had made no complaint, a thick carpet was under foot, and he stood unobtrusively withdrawn from their midst.

At one side of the room, standing close to one of the deepest windows, two other men were speaking in undertones. El Topo was one; the other a little, weazened man whose puckered face, with its bright, little eyes, resembled nothing on earth so much as a superannuated gray monkey. Those eyes of this Pedro Perrigo's had the habit of being everywhere at once, but just now so intent was he on what passed between him and the gross El Topo that they did not stray from the other's face. The two spoke very earnestly; only the murmur of their voices crossed the room, yet that murmur was electric. Short, quick, emphatic sentences, half finished, were cut across by others, short and quick and emphatic.

El Topo chanced first to see the man who had just

come in. With a final curt grunted utterance to the little monkey of a man he turned away. Pedro Perrigo stood where he was for a few seconds; he faced the window, and might have been thought to be staring out into the moonlit gardens were it not for the heavy yellow curtains. Obviously, then, he was communing with his own thoughts.

Julian Hawk, about to come on into the room, saw a hand slip through the curtains and pluck the little Pedro Perrigo by the sleeve; a white hand blazing with rings, a bare white arm. Perrigo started visibly, then leaned closer to the curtains and to some one who was hidden behind them, seated doubtless on the wide window-ledge. He may have whispered something; certainly the sound of his voice did not now carry to the ears which Hawk lent to the occasion. And in another moment Perrigo had followed El Topo, and the two quitted the room by a side door.

"So," said Julian Hawk to himself, "some little something is afoot! And the lady who vanished from old Castañares' room as I went in, and who fled like a little shadow among the shrubs, now hides behind a pair of curtains."

He came on into the room now, looking idle enough as he bent his head over the cigarette he was rolling. He glanced about him as though seeking a seat at random; he drew a chair to the side of the room and sat down so close to the curtains in question that he could have put out a hand without rising and brushed them aside. Then, a picture of brooding, indifferent idleness, he lighted his cigarette.

There was in his act something of sheer diableric. He did not know who it was that hid here, and he did not know why, and he did not care. An impulse prompted

him to sit himself down where she, be she who or what she might, could not escape him without being seen. How she had got here in the first place he could not, of course, know; perhaps, idling through the room where others were used to seeing her, she had found her opportunity to slip behind the curtains while no eye was turned toward her. And thus she had chanced to overhear what passed between the two men. She had allowed El Topo to go, then had had her brief word with Pedro Perrigo; well, she would stay where she was for a while, or Julian Hawk would watch her come forth.

He had supped well in a little room where the Indian boy had served him and now was well satisfied to have his cigarette and to be a passive onlooker. True, passivity in this man seemed almost an anomaly; with any part to be played one looked instinctively to a man like him to step into an assertive rôle. Such idleness as his now was plainly but of the moment; while one awaited.

Presently El Topo came back and straight to him. If *El Capitan* was of the mood for a game of some kind— But Julian Hawk waved him aside, saying only:

"Presently."

So El Topo crossed the big room to stand watching the others who were busied at cards and dice. And then the little monkey-like man returned to emulate El Topo, a casual looker-on. Upon both of them Hawk turned keen, suspicious eyes. One would have said that all the while he was something more than halfway expecting something to happen—and that he was quite ready for it.

All that happened at the moment, however, was that the same door through which Hawk himself had entered a few minutes before, opened now and a girl came in. And Julian Hawk stared, as well he might.

She was dressed all in black, arms and throat bare. There was a flash of jewelry about her, either gems or fine imitations sparkling in the big buckles of her little shoes, at her throat, in her hair. One hand was lifted to the lacy mantilla thrown over her head; Julian Hawk saw the hand and the clash of color in its rings, and with one sweep of his arm pushed back the curtains from the window. Then he fell to frowning. Here was the usual deep window seat with the usual iron grille on which he had counted, thinking to hold a captive there. But the place was empty.

He dropped the curtains quickly and turned about. It would appear that none had seen him, for all eyes, save those of the girl herself, were on her, and she had not turned toward him. He settled back in his chair, watching her with a renewed, if superficial interest. He put her down, having no choice in the matter, as a professional entertainer; certainly she was quite at home here in this gambling hell and no stranger to any of the players. A rather pretty Mexican girl, he thought at first.

"Viva La Güera!" called out one of the card players, and reached out for a glass which he lifted, toasting her. "Where did you disappear just now? Stand back of my chair a moment, will you? And what I win I'll share with you."

She only laughed at him, shaking her head. Curls whipped back and forth. And then she turned swiftly, facing Julian Hawk across the wide room.

As she did so it was the little monkey of a man, Pedro Perrigo, who hastened to her side. Hawk, seeing both faces clearly now, thought of Beauty and the Beast. Little Perrigo was saying something in his lowest tones; he put out his arm, stiff and awkward about it, and the

hand of the flashing rings came to rest lightly on it like some gorgeous butterfly. Then the two, their purpose obvious from the first step, bore down upon Julian Hawk.

"Señor El Capitan Gabilan Colorado," said the little Perrigo, eyeing him sharply, giving him to the best of his ability the whole of his name and title, then making a stiff bow, "I have the honor to present you to my daughter, Señorita La Güera Perrigo."

Julian Hawk, having not the slightest intention of rising and making himself agreeable, merely thrust his long legs still farther out before him and stared at the two coolly. What a pair they were, was his first thought! The girl was a graceful slip of a thing, of no great tallness even in her amazingly high-heeled slippers, yet the top of Perrigo's head was on a level with her shoulder. His face was all lines and creases and wrinkles, but illy concealed by the thin black and white beard; his ugliness, set so close to her lively beauty, was a hundredfold accentuated.

Having in open insolence studied Perrigo, the bold eyes went in unhurrying, methodical fashion about examining the girl. She stood silent, waiting for him to speak, a queer look in her own eyes. Many men had looked at her; she was used to many kinds of glances. But never had she known a man to sit like that and hold his silence and make her the object in this fashion of his cold, critical, and utterly impersonal investigation. And one of the first things which he remarked, missing no trifles, was how a faintly heightened color crept into her cheeks.

If she looked to him for any sign of admiration, of appreciation even, she was to be disappointed. He must have marked how her loveliness was not the beauty of old Mexico; she was all that her name, La Güera,

promised for her. La Güera—The Fair One. It was the epithet among dusky-skinned beauties for the exception of the lighter complexion. There were bronze and gold in her curls; her eyes, looking very sweet and soft and alluring, were a tender gray.

Perrigo began to shift his feet and fell to frowning. Of a sudden Julian Hawk rose to his feet and made the girl his belated bow.

"It is your eyes, you know, señorita," he said with a laugh. "We shall talk of them. You are going to tell me where you got them. And then, also, you will let me know if you are in some way related to that other La Güera, the Fair Rodriguez."

He placed his chair for her and stepped to another, drawing it closer. As he sat down again the little Pedro Perrigo, whom he had ignored, moved away.

The girl clasped her hands in her lap and for a silent moment sat looking at her rings. Then, lifting her eyes, she remarked gravely:

"Do I find in the renowned El Capitan Colorado one who leaps back nimbly more than a hundred years to pay a compliment? And, though it is said that one should not analyze too closely the pretty speeches that are made one, still I wonder if the great German scientist, though he knew other matters, was to be relied upon when it was a question of a woman's beauty. I'll just remember, shall I, that Humboldt said that his La Güera was the very nicest and loveliest lady he ever met in all his wide travels?"

Hawk made his fresh cigarette. If she thought to surprise him into another mood than his cold, critical one she failed utterly.

"Shall I ask for a bottle of champagne?" he asked. She merely nodded and shrugged; as careless as him-

self. He caught El Topo's eye, found it, in fact, already upon him, and presently the champagne was served on a little table near the window, the two glasses frothing and bubbling merrily. He drank meditatively; she scarcely touched her glass to her lips and set it down.

"And so," he went on, still thoughtful, "the dancing-girls of the cantinas nowadays read history and science, no doubt."

She laughed softly. Not a gesture or inflection, not a glance escaped him. Yes, there was an undertow of excitement running through the place to-night; it had touched El Topo and the monkey-man. There was the glint of it in her eyes. Those other men, still busy at their cards and dice, knew nothing of it. But La Güera knew.

"We were to speak of my eyes, señor," she reminded him.

"Yes. Why not? It was your eyes, I confess, that decided me. That little man who introduced us—"

"My papa. Pedro Perrigo."

"Thanks. Now he did not give you a pair of eyes like Venus'. He gave you nothing in the way of physical appearance. Yet, if he is your father, he must have given you something. Then what, La Güera? His character?"

"If so, he would be giving me something finer than fine gold," she said swiftly.

"What! You mean that the little Pedro Perrigo is not what he seems, then? That he is not an outright rascal—like the rest here?"

"The rest? You include yourself, then, señor?"

"And why not? You have my name. You call me the renowned Captain Colorado, so you would appear to have heard of me."

"We wander to other things; my eyes then do not hold you, señor?"

"Rather they do—just now when, I must confess, I am idle."

"They are the gift, I am told, of my mother—"

"Strange," said Julian Hawk. "Strange, I mean, that such eyes could ever be love-eyes when turned upon such a man as Papa Perrigo!"

"It is not of Papa Perrigo that we should talk," she said, and having frowned she smiled suddenly. Smiled, he thought, with an effort; stirred herself to a lively vivacity when, in fact, she labored under some sort of strain. "It is always more interesting to speak of one's self, is it not? Now, what more interesting than that such a man as El Gabilan should turn up here? All without warning. One wonders why? What could there be in Nacional to draw him?"

His strong bronzed fingers fell to twisting the stem of his glass.

"There is the Hacienda Escondida," he observed.

"And at the Hacienda Escondida?"

"There is La Güera."

She frowned again. He spoke the few words coldly, even contemptuously; they were, she felt, like a light little slap in the face. They were the words of a man who cloaked himself in some chilly reserve and tossed them out like a cheap coin to a girl of the cantina.

"You do not drink your wine," he reminded her.

"I have tasted it. I do not always do that!"

"Your place is to encourage spending here, of course. You are paid a percentage."

"And if I am, señor?" She could be as chill as himself. The words were crisply defiant.

"You have been here long?"

"Less than six weeks, Señor Capitan."

"And before that?"

"Do you seek all my life's history?"

He shrugged indifferently.

"It was your suggestion that we speak of ourselves. Which, of course, meant of you." And then, very obvious about it, he smothered a yawn.

Her slippered foot began beating on the carpet. Uf! how the man angered her! To be sure it was her privilege to rise and move away. Yet, as obvious to him as his intentional yawn had been to her, something much stronger than even a strong impulse held her. And in the end she laughed again, and chose to ignore the man's pointed rudeness.

"Shall we trade in secrets? What if I offered to exchange all the secrets of my poor little life for one or two of yours?"

"So there are secrets even in the life of a brigand?" said Hawk, brows lifted.

She chose to laugh again, saying lightly:

"Brigand? Which one of us? Or both, perhaps?" Then she leaned a trifle closer across the table to add something. That little gesture, altogether involuntary, he was sure, was eloquent. She was in earnest, then. "What if I wanted to know all about the death of Chavez, the Squirrel? And why you are here? And what you wish of Blondino?"

"Set to play the Beautiful Spy on me, by El Topo and Pedro Perrigo?"

"No! No, señor! I swear it—" she flashed out passionately. If never before, she was in dead earnest now. He examined her more critically than ever. There were two things to do: One was to laugh in her face; the other was to play the game of secrets with her. Well, why not?

There were things he wanted to know. She had ended with Blondino; he might begin there.

"Blondino, now," he said. "You see, I meet you in confidences. I would drop a word or two into this pretty Blondino's ear. When does he arrive?"

"When will the next wind blow from the north?" she exclaimed. "When will the next star shoot across the sky? When will the next earthquake shake the earth or the next revolution break out in Mexico?"

"So it's like that? One does not know beforehand when Blondino is coming?"

"In our game of secrets, señor—"

"You suggested the first move. You were to tell me where, until the last six weeks, the earth had kept hidden its most precious flower?"

Again that muffled beating of an impatient slipper on the thick carpet. To toss a pretty speech like that, so coldly, so contemptuously! Yet she controlled herself and said lightly enough:

"In the convent, señor."

He helped himself to his wine, seeming to enjoy it, for the moment forgetful of her. When at last he spoke it was as though he had dragged his thoughts back by force of will.

"In the convent? Ah! To be sure. Then, the straight direct road from the convent to the Hacienda Escondida! Papa Perrigo goes for his little daughter, brings her out of the ugly convent walls, ushers her into bright, happy life in the place of El Topo! That has the ring of truth to it, La Güera."

"It is true," she said.

"And little Papa Perrigo, meaning to find a fine market for his innocent lamb—"

"Christ! Be still! Do you prowl about the world

like a wolf, snarling ugly things, just to make the world hate and hunt you? Why are you so eager that even I, only La Güera Perrigo, should come to hate you?"

His cold stare did not falter, did not alter in the slightest.

"Your hate, you poor little fool," he told her evenly, "would mean just as much to me as a fleck of dust on my sleeve."

She bit her lips; her eyes were lowered. The man's words stung like poison insects. He made her writhe inwardly; she felt that he was ten years older than she, ten years wiser and keener—and more brutal. Suddenly she looked up, keen eyed.

"Why do you call me a little fool like that?"

"We're all fools, aren't we?"

"You didn't mean that. Why did you say it?"

"Playing the game, telling secrets," he retorted in his nearest approach to a semblance of good humor. "A little fool, a poor little fool, pretty and bright and sparkling, selling herself cheaply for a flash of joy perhaps, or for a handful of gold!"

She had not shown him before how haughty she could be.

"I do not sell myself, señor," she told him, her eyes flashing. "Not to any man."

"Papa Perrigo is the merchant, then? He does the selling, he who is like so much fine gold."

"Oh! You are intolerable! No, señor; Papa Perrigo is not like that."

"Then—*Blondino!*"

He came back to Blondino with a rush. At Blondino they had started, with Blondino his thoughts had lingered. He wondered about her own, and spoke the name sharply, watching her narrowly. And he saw a look in

her eyes, soft no longer, that suggested naked knives. Once more she leaned closer across the table, her voice low, hushed tremulously.

"Blondino! You are here to speak with Victor Blondino, señor? That is what brings you? From Chavez, dying, you come straight to Blondino. Why, señor?"

"You love this Blondino, then? To him, you who are not to be sold, make the gift of yourself?"

He knew before he had finished how she hated Blondino. It was in her eyes which told it as not even shouting voices could have done. He fell again to twisting his glass.

"It may chance after all," he said at last with a queer smile in which there was nothing of mirth just as there is nothing mirthful in a sneer, "that you and I may have secrets to trade! We are going, I think, to drive a hard bargain before we are done. The one whose need is the sorest is the one who pays highest. That one, I think is you, little pretty La Güera."

Here were two girls in one. The fact was readily discernible by one as shrewd as Julian Hawk. A girl who was full of joy, yet shivery with some icy fear, who came from the convent to the Hacienda Escondida, who was La Güera and the daughter of Pedro Perriga! A girl who now wanted to turn her back on him and yet who sought his company, who was athrill with some masked excitement and yet who, strangest of all these strange matters, half hid also some weary wistfulness. There were as many facets to her as to a diamond, and each darted forth its own varied light.

"It is the truth about the convent, then?" he demanded abruptly.

"It is true," she answered swiftly.

"And this life you lead here, it is all new to you? For, coming straight from the convent, you tarried nowhere along the road to play about in other places like this?"

"All that is true."

"Those eyes of yours, La Güera. Let us look into them a moment."

She lifted them steadily to his. For a long moment they regarded each other with a peculiar intentness. each seeking far below the surface. It was now Julian Hawk who fell to frowning.

"Whether true or lies," he said bluntly, "for the present, suppose that we accept it as being the truth? Your Papa Perrigo then brought you straight here; if not to sell you, La Güera, for what other purpose?"

"Am I to answer every question?"

"As you like. It is you who began this; it is you who would trade in secrets; it is you, as I have said once, whose need is the sorest."

"How do you know that, señor?" she shot at him. "What tells you?"

"A pair of eyes. Eyes which, of course, lie, but which, like all liars, speak the truth at times. Your look and your voice when we spoke of a certain Blondino."

"Ah!" Then she bit her lips and grew silent, her eyes hidden from him.

"Would you lift your hand, señorita," he said presently, and looking up she saw that he was laughing silently, "to save our Blondino's life for him?"

Like a flash came her answer now:

"God forgive me—no!"

He leaned back in his chair, sending a puff of smoke ceilingward. When he looked back at her, her fascinating eyes saw that hard, bright laughter still in his.

"You are here—to kill him?" she whispered.

He yawned openly.

"Run away, now, to your Papa Perrigo," he said lightly. "Tell him and the stupid El Topo what you have learned. They are watching us, you see. They'll expect some such report, I think."

She jumped to her feet, all of a sudden seeming very gay; it was quite as though, at the end of a bantering conversation, they tossed back and forth between them some light nothing. But what she said whisperingly was:

"We are watched, yes. I will find out when he is coming. I will tell you—everything. Meet me in half an hour—outside. Through the green door in the patio—"

Her long earrings flashing, the jewels in her high Spanish comb catching fire as she moved away through the candlelight, she returned to the tables where dice rolled and cards fell. Here she was hailed gayly. She slipped her arm through Papa Perrigo's and stood looking on at the play, the color bright in her cheeks.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENED UNDER THE PEPPER TREES

Julian Hawk let his eyes linger with La Güera as she rejoined the others. He was entirely conscious of the fact that in the meantime El Topo was regarding him keenly. Well, if they chose, let them think that he had fallen an easy victim to the girl's charms. Suspecting this, they would be less likely to suspect other things. He finished his glass of wine, caught El Topo's eye at last, and beckoned.

"It grows dull here, *hombre*. I think that, earlier we spoke of a possible game of chance?"

"*Si, señor*. They will gladly make a place for you at either table. Cards or the dice?"

"I'd play the house, El Topo. I have watched that game out of the corner of my eye. The stakes are ridiculous."

El Topo, not in the least surprised, nodded.

"As you like, señor. We are always ready here. Either cards or dice. Or what you will."

"Dice, then. They roll faster. And look you, *hombre;* send a boy out to see if my horse is being cared for properly. And tell the stable-boy that I myself shall step out there in half an hour and shall cut his ears off if my horse breathes a whisper of discontent."

El Topo laughed as at a jest, saw no answering flicker in the eyes coolly bent on him, and grunted a savage:

"*Bueno.*" Turning away, he added over his fat shoulder: "Will you play here or in a private room?"

"Here."

When El Topo returned presently, carrying a little tin box under his arm, Papa Perrigo trotted along with him. La Güera had tarried but briefly at the other table, had wandered listlessly through the room, and, though there were those who pleaded for her to remain, she at last went her way.

El Topo and Perrigo drew chairs up to a table; Hawk joined them. At the outset he saw how it was; Perrigo was the one who was going to shake dice with him, while El Topo looked on. The two, perhaps, looked for high stakes and swift play. As they turned their speculative eyes on him he yawned in their faces. Perrigo's look brightened. He reached somewhat eagerly for the dice cup.

"I'll trouble you now for what there is left in my purse," said Hawk.

El Topo produced the buckskin bag, dropping it to the table, shrugging and drawing down the corners of his little mouth as he said:

"If that is all the señor has—"

Hawk poured out the contents of the little sack—silver coins, both Mexican and American, and a few crumpled American bank-notes.

"Count it, cover it, and roll the bones. Sudden death, if you please, *hombres*. No horses, no long agonies."

A stranger, meaning to play high, could do no better than ask for dice. Among thieves or elsewhere he had his nearly even break; even, save for the percentage always in favor of the house.

It was El Topo who did the counting.

"Two hundred thirty pesos," he said.

"That ought to be close enough, allowing for the levy you've made against it," agreed Hawk, and reached for the dice cup.

"High hand, one flop; suit you, Papa Perrigo?"

"*Bueno,*" said the little monkey-man.

And Perrigo won. As he drew his winnings in toward him the American produced a neat leather wallet which he had kept in a pocket inside his shirt. He opened a flat pad of bank-notes, yellow bank-notes, looking fresh and new. He counted out five of these, placing them before him and waiting for El Topo to produce five hundred dollars from his tin box. The money was planked down, the dice rolled again.

Already, across the room, it was sensed that a game was on. In ten minutes the other games were set aside and the several men came to watch. Both El Topo and Perrigo looked up; Julian Hawk did not.

He lost the second time, and again made his five-hundred-dollar bet. And now he won, and again he won, and again. In a very few minutes of quick, hard play the tin box was empty; El Topo, shrugging but looking hot and evil, turned it upside down.

"You win three thousand dollars, señor," he grunted. "That's all."

Julian Hawk, with his two hands on the table in front of him, leaned far back in his chair to stare as in amazement.

"You mean, *hombre,* that at the Hacienda Escondida three thousand dollars ends it! You are making sport of me!" And he began to frown angrily.

Even Pedro Perrigo, though he said nothing as he sat juggling with the dice, screwed up his weazened face and looked curiously at his compatriot. To lose three thousand and then to declare the bank broken! But El Topo, floundering to his feet, exclaimed gruffly:

"That is all for now. Later, maybe."

Hawk placed the winnings in his wallet and buck-

skin bag; the two he shoved across the table to El Topo, saying carelessly:

"Put that away for me until I ask for it, *hombre*. I am going out to look at my horse."

He went out, not through the patio, but through the front ante-room; here was a man, who, having his directions given him, appeared always to find a way of his own. El Topo glared after him and fell to muttering. Little Perrigo began to laugh, showing a mouth of many missing teeth.

"You are not in love with his way of calling you '*hombre*,' like that, eh, *amigo?* Then why don't you tell him?"

Hawk went straight to the stable as he had promised. He found his horse saddled, the cinch loosely drawn, the spurs on the saddle horn, the rifle in place, the bridle at hand. The animal, a really superb golden sorrel, nosed him, was patted affectionately, and looked wistfully after him as he quitted the stable. From here he made something of a wide, irregular arc on his way to the rear of the house, turning this way and that among the big trees of the garden, ignoring pathways.

The air was sweet and cool out here; the moon shone down brilliantly from a clear sky so that it was almost like day; the pepper-trees dropped inky shadows. Somewhere near by a mocking-bird, nightingale of the border, sprinkled a spray of clear notes through the silence. Hawk, motionless in the shadow, stood listening.

It was La Güera who discovered him and came swiftly, as silent as a shadow, to the meeting. She had drawn her mantilla about her head; her face shone white in the moonlight, her eyes looking very large and bright.

"There is electricity in the air to-night—eh, La Güera Perrigo?" said Hawk lightly enough, but with dark eyes

bent intently upon her. "El Topo fairly bristles with something he'd suppress; Papa Perrigo, though a cooler hand, as I fancy, is restless and eager; and Perrigo's convent-bred little daughter is all a-thrill—or a-shiver—"

"To kill a man!" she exclaimed nervously. "It is a terrible thing, señor!"

"Oh! Is it?" He fell to sneering at her now. "And a moment ago I'd have sworn that La Güera, were she offered Blondino's scalp-lock, would have worn it gayly and even gratefully as a trophy, vindication and visible evidence of hatred satisfied. What change have a handful of little minutes worked? Behold the same La Güera of a sudden ready to spill tears for Señor Blondino!"

Just as steel struck against flint evokes a spark, so did the uttering of Blondino's name seem always to strike fire from the girl's very soul. Her hands clenched at her sides. A moment she appeared to be undecided, hesitant, caught in a balance of desires and fears.

"You asked me if I would raise a hand to save that —that thing's life, and I said 'No.' Why should I? You do not know him as I do; you have not the reasons which are mine—"

"Sure of that?" he demanded sharply.

"But," she ran on earnestly, "it is not of him that I force myself to think at this moment. It is of you, Señor Capitan!"

"Of me?" He laughed insolently. "It has been my thought, Little Butterfly of the Convents, that if any chanced upon us here talking so confidentially together, he might be allowed to suppose that your sweet loveliness has set the fires raging in my heart. But it was never in my mind that you or I should dream such nonsense. That *you* should think kindly of *me*. Bah!"

"Not kindly, perhaps," she retorted swiftly, "but in

mere human fairness; in the commonest justice to one who offers to rid me of an unbearable persecution; to strike off fetters which gall and burn and gnaw so deep —oh, to the very heart and soul!"

"Do butterflies, even convent bred, find the tragic rôles inviting to their little romantic souls, then?" he jeered at her.

Her eyes flashed; he knew that her anger leaped up like a bright, clean flame. But she put a guard upon herself and said coolly:

"We stand on the brink of things to-night, señor. Tragedy or comedy—how am I to know? Do you know what it is to kill? Have you ever done that?"

"Consider the question answered as suits you best," he said, all indifference, "and let us proceed."

"To kill a man, even in a just quarrel, even though a man who is all goodness exterminates one who is all vileness, is at one step to pass over a threshold across which there is no return, señor. It is to become outlawed; to stand with one's back at a wall and the whole world in front of him, waiting to pull him down. My father has done that, señor!"

"So? Well, I'm not in the least amazed. The fellow has the face of a killer."

"Oh! Would you goad me?" she panted, drawn away from him, become rigid in every muscle. She breathed deep and went on, forcing herself to be at least outwardly calm. "I think that in exchange for the great secret you have shown me to-night I may tell these things; it is fair and it can do no harm. My father killed a man; and what though it was done in all justice, for nothing less even than the honor of my mother? Ever since he has been a hunted man; ever since, Blondino has held him

in the hollow of a brutal hand; ever since has my father slept in dread. And even I—"

"It is Blondino who, using the knowledge, forces you to step from convent to gaming house?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. You asked if I picked up what money I could —little commissions on bottles of champagne, shares of winnings when I stood behind the chairs of those who won. Is that not hateful? Yet do I not do it gladly, even thanking God for the chance? For I have thought to buy the liberty of my father and myself thus from Victor Blondino. And now—to-night—"

He watched her curiously, wondering what would come next; wondering, too, since he had his own reasons to be steeped in cynicism, just how much of truth was in her words and actions, how much sheer guile and deceit.

"Would you marry me, señor? There is a priest waiting. Marry me, and—"

He laughed at her.

"You're a fascinating little trick and all that, enchantress, temptress, a Lilith de luxe, as pretty as a peach and as soft as moonlight. But marry you? No, thanks."

Humiliation, anger, hot resentment, were all set seething in her; even in this dim light under the pepper-trees he could see how the blood mounted to her brow.

"Oh, I am shamed! But you do not let me finish; it was to marry me and go! Leave me for all time. I would have paid you, even to the extent of a thousand pesos which I have saved. There would then be a divorce—"

"Your Church does not smile on divorces, does it?" he jibed, interested in her smothered fury.

"It is not that I should ever marry again. Do you

think, señor, that I would truly wed with any man who breathes?"

"It is a question of Blondino again?"

"It is for ever Blondino! He comes soon, and my father wishes me to wed him. Oh, not ever to be wife to him, merely to go through the form, then to sign certain papers—and then, both my father and I to be free for ever!"

"These papers?"

"My mother, it seems, owned some mines which she inherited. They come to me. They are worthless, yet Blondino does not know that—"

"You would trick the gentleman?"

"How may one traffic with such men except in trickery?"

"And, though you could come at the desired end thus, yet you hesitate?"

"I do not trust Blondino! How do I know that he is not deceiving my father?"

"Or your father deceiving you? Or you trying the game on me for some fathomless reason? Why, in any case, turn to me? You would appear to know something of me—"

"I know you for Captain Colorado, which is to say a bandit captain. Such as Blondino is. But I know that no man living can be half as terrible and merciless and unthinkably vile as he."

"So you find a choice among outlaws? By the way," he added curiously, watching her narrowly, "did it ever dawn on you that I might be here as a friend to Blondino?"

She sprang back from him as though from the hiss of a snake.

"Why not?" he laughed at her. "What more natural

than one cut-throat captain offer alliance with another?"

She still drew away from him. Whether to believe this, and that he had been playing with her all along, whether to think that now he merely made light mockery of the moment, having a curiosity to see just how she would writhe under his words, she could not even guess. She could only draw back and stare at him and wonder.

Three steps carried her out of the denser shadow; another couple of backward paces carried her into a region of ragged shadow and mottled light. Still his voice, charged with mockery, followed her:

"Had I believed all this wild tale—which I do not—why should you have thought that I'd marry you?"

"I thought—because of your hate for Blondino—to cheat him—"

A sort of gasp from the man. To cheat Blondino all along the line! His quick step now was toward her.

"La Güera! Wait a moment!"

But their *tête-à-tête* was at an end. She was in the full moonlight, and another pair of eyes had made her out, a slim, shawled figure poised for flight, her white face turned toward the house. A man came rushing toward her, stopped and cried out something inarticulately, tossed up his arms in a strange, wondering way, and came on swiftly. It was the man of the terribly scarred face, Señor Castañares. And as he hurried toward her he exclaimed brokenly, joy and doubt contending in his shaken voice:

"*Mi Señora!* At last you come to me. Juana! *Juana!*"

His wild utterance, his palpitant agitation, frightened her. She started back from him. Between him in front and Julian Hawk behind, where he had stopped in the thick of the shadows, she paused, uncertain.

Then of a rush came such sudden catastrophe that her brain was in a whirl. What was happening? Castañares was crying out wild things, naming her Juana; another man was upon him, having run out of the house. This was a little man, and he, too, seemed strangely excited. It was Pedro Perrigo. The two seemed to be struggling there in the gloom; Castañares' voice rose in a wailing shriek, like the ultimate cry of the mad. His voice and Perrigo's were all confused.

"Let go! Let go! Let go! You shall not hold me back from her. Do you know who she is? They have fooled me long enough; they have said she was dead. Have they tricked her, too—"

All confusion; a devil's dance there of mad figures. Pedro Perrigo's cries, laced through with a snarl. A blow struck. A sudden silvering of something jerked upward in Perrigo's hand. A knife!

She covered her face with her hands, mingling her shriek with the others. But that was for an instant only. She looked again. The knife was coming down only now.

And then, from the shadows behind her, was a spurt of flame—the crack of a pistol—and she saw little Pedro Perrigo spin about and pitch forward on his face. The knife, oddly enough, came flying through the air toward her and stuck, quivering, in the trunk of the tree at her side.

And here, to confuse confusion, came a rattle of many racing hoofs and the scurry of riders. At their head rode a man who was the cause of the shout which rose sharply from those who had hastened out of the house:

"Blondino!"

CHAPTER V

THE FORCE OF BLONDINO

DOMINANT above the commotion rose one strong voice, bell-toned and mighty and deeply melodious. It was the ringing voice of command, of power, of supreme, dictating authority cloaked in fearlessness; the voice of a fierce and glowing arbiter of his own and many another destiny along the border. The mellow thunder of some untrammelled golden Jove of sheer masculinity as masculinity spells itself along the frontiers of countries and of man-made laws. The voice of Blondino.

"Stand back! Give room!" There was the sound of a blow as Blondino plowed his way through the little knot of men like a bull tossing terriers aside. "What, La Güera! Some one has shot my La Güera for me—"

For she had thrown herself down upon the body of little Pedro Perrigo, and in the moonlight, Blondino, seeing her there, made the logical mistake.

"No, no! It is Perrigo," cried El Topo, who, with the men from the gaming tables, had rushed out at the first sound of an altercation.

"What," roared Blondino. "The little Perrigo? Some one has shot him? Stand aside, girl"; and he plucked La Güera to her feet as though she had been a doll, setting her to one side while he stooped over the man on the ground.

Perrigo fell to groaning, and Blondino straightened up, looking about him.

"Who did this thing?" he demanded.

La Güera might have answered, but, seeing the way clear, she was again on her knees, catching Perrigo's head against her breast, calling chokingly upon him to tell her that he was not too terribly hurt, and then half-fainting as she feared that already he was dying.

So it was El Topo who answered to the best of his ability. Which is to say, he did as most men would have done in like circumstances, made a vivid patchwork of what he knew and what he guessed, and offered it as the plain truth.

"It was Castañares there. He and Perrigo have had words of late. To-night they were quarrelling when I heard them and ran out. It was all confusion, and in the fraças Castañares there shot him."

"So," said Blondino, after the fashion of a man rudely shaken and meaning to have a moment to grasp something which he found bewildering. "You, El Topo, with a man or two if you need them, carry Castañares to his room and keep him there until I come. You others to the stables with the horses."

Again he set La Güera aside, and now took the little man up into his arms.

"We'll see how much hurt you are, little Monkey-Man of mine," he said not ungently. "One shot only? What's one bullet to a grown he-man, Pedrito?"

"For the love of God," moaned Perrigo.

"There, there," said Blondino, for all the world like some big stolid woman mothering a fretful child. "Hurts, does it? Put your teeth through your lip, Pedrito *mio;* I'm going to take care of you. Hang on tight; you've ever had the trick of that, eh, *Cara de Mono?* And you can thank all your saints, *amigo,* that Victor Blondino himself chanced along at the right minute."

He was a very big man, this Blondino, and one power-

fully muscled. For him it was no task to carry such as the dwarfish Perrigo. The two passed in at the open door, others surging along in their wake; some one thought to get candles; a moment later Blondino put his burden down on a bed and stood back to regard the weazened face, which was more ape-like than ever now, with a queer look of panic in the small, hot eyes.

"Clear out, all of you," commanded Blondino. "Estrada, bring me some good brandy. La Güera, bring clean cloths and hot water. Go, now. Close the door. Leave that window open. Let the man have fresh air. Oh, what a pack of gaping, silly fools," he grunted in a sort of good-humored, indolent tolerance.

At last he was alone with the man on the bed. Blondino, his big gauntletted hands on his hips, stood looking down on the wounded man compassionately.

"My poor little Perrigo," he said softly. "It hurts then, eh? Never mind; you have been a good and faithful servant to me, Little One, and I am going to take care of you now."

He had thrust his hat far back on his head; the candlelight revealed a profusion of little clustering ringlets, like a girl's, bright with soft golden lights. Soft light hair like flax with gold dust sifted through it. Here again, despite a tongue long used to the Southern speech, was an unmistakable Anglo-Saxon. An odd thing, perhaps—but then Anglo-Saxon blood has ever seethed upward into leadership—that of the two bandit chieftains come to the Hacienda Escondida to-night, both were American.

Here, as in that other adventurer who had come earlier, was a man of the North whom the country had striven to make over into a man of the South, physically if not otherwise. The ardent sun of Mexico, playing gold-

smith to the fairer skin, had overlaid it with a thin layer of gold leaf. But the eyes remained as blue as sapphires. A small, thick mustache was brushed up fiercely at the ends. The man breathed animal force; he was like a dynamo, throwing out surging waves of power, or, among the common run of men, like a valiant stallion in a field of jaded, work-worn, spiritless geldings. He had never encountered the man whom he could not have lifted and strangled in his hands.

Fierceness in him was never to be overlooked, no matter what his momentary mood. Now, with his bright blue eyes softening to pity, it was merely as though a transparent cloak were drawn over his savagery. A strange tenderness emanated from him, yet did not obliterate ruthlessness.

Perrigo tried to lift himself on an elbow, gasping for breath. He fell back again, his drawn face a grimy white, a sweat of agony on his brow and running, glistening, down the creases of his cheeks.

Blondino sighed compassionately; his eyes grew so gentle that it must be that tears were gathering.

"My little Perrigo," he said softly, "be still, I am going to look at your hurt."

Over the table at the bedside was a small mirror. Blondino, stooping slightly, saw his own countenance in it. The mirrored reflection stopped him, held him. The look in his eyes altered; he brushed up his mustaches more fiercely than ever. It appeared that he forgot Perrigo. He had not seen a mirror for days. This one trapped him every bit as much as the ancient forest pool ensnared Narcissus. He became the vital, full-forced embodiment of Vanity. He admired himself openly, indifferent of pretense. He found himself the most perfect expression of manhood he had ever seen. It would

have been with Blondino a weakness to strive to mask his own superlative self-approval. He reeked with conceit. "I am Blondino!" It satisfied him to be Blondino; he was infatuated with Blondino. A man of steel, he gloried in muscular perfection; a strange admixture of Vulcan and Narcissus outwardly, he could never tire of noting how the little curls clustered about his brow, or how below the neckscarf his skin was soft and white.

Again Perrigo stirred and, stirring, moaned. Reluctantly, with a hint of a frown in them, Blondino's eyes withdrew from the glass. Then he became on the instant thoughtful of his henchman and more tenderly sympathetic than before. Taking off his gauntlets, he sought the wound. But Perrigo's nervous hands, into which the strength of his entire body seemed to flow, fought him off.

"The padre," whispered the little man frantically. "Send him to me. Quick!"

Blondino's mighty hand exerted a gentle, reassuring pressure on the bony shoulder.

"Oh, it's not so bad as that, Pedrito. This wound is nothing. It's too high up, *amigo;* too far to the side."

"I am dying," gasped Perrigo, a terrible fear in his eyes. "The priest, for the love of God, señor."

Blondino patiently strove with him, doing all that a man could to banish the terrible dread which looked so wildly forth from Perrigo's eyes. He even tore the shirt away from the wound and then scoffed at it being in the least dangerous. He bared his own chest and showed no less than three scars, swearing that the least of them had comer closer to snipping the thread of life for him than Perrigo's wound could possibly do for Perrigo. But the wounded man would not listen. A fear, greater even than the fear of death, was on him. And Blondino,

quicker than most men to read the other fellow, saw clearly to the muddy depths of Pedro Perrigo.

"A priest?" said Blondino sternly, standing straight. "You'd confess your petty sins, eh, Perrigo?"

"Send me the priest—"

"So you'd have a confessional. And, hurrying to get the stains off your own coat-tails, you'd not care if others were spattered a bit, eh, Little One?"

"You'd not have me condemned to the flames of hell, señor!"

"You think only of yourself, then, not of me, Pedrito?"

Just here came La Güera, running back to them with a basin of hot water and a clean sheet.

"La Güera," panted Perrigo, "come to me. I am dying. But I cannot die before—"

"Fool," stormed Blondino. "Be still! La Güera, do what I tell you." He took the things from her hands, set them down, and then thrust her out through the door. "Run for the padre! He is not far away, if my earlier orders were obeyed. Your little papa has need of him."

"Oh!" She shrank back in terror. "You do not mean—"

"He may be dying. Yes. Now run."

She fled in the wildest haste. Blondino closed the door. Then he came close to Perrigo. All compassion was dead in the bright blue eyes now, leaving them merciless.

"So, little coward, you would blab," sneered Blondino. "Don't you know better than that?"

Now the third fear sprang up in Perrigo, and this fear wiped the others out; fear of Blondino towering over him.

Yes, he was afraid of death; he was more afraid of the flames of hell, after death; and most of all he was afraid of Blondino. Yet what could Blondino do to

frighten a man who already thought that he was going to die?

Perrigo, shrinking back, nearly dead already, not from his wound but from his three mortal terrors, joined his hands in dramatic supplication, begging earnestly.

"Let me have peace at the end, Señor Blondino. I am not all bad; you know that, señor. The girl, señor. That has begun of late to haunt me. For, don't you see, she has come to love me like a father, and I, am I stone and iron, then, señor? You will let her come to me? Her and the padre—I have served you like a dog—*Have mercy!*"

He tried to scream but his voice caught in his throat. Again he reared up, trying to struggle up to his feet, with the bed between him and his captain.

"For the love—"

Blondino struck as hard a blow as even he could deliver. His fist crashed into the little man's temple, hurling him out of the bed. Had it been a hammer, not merely a fist, striking him, the result would have been the same. Death must have been instantaneous.

Blondino looked at his own fist as though to see if the skin were broken; he flexed the fingers, clenching them tight, opening them wide two or three times. Then he dragged Perrigo's fallen body back to the bed, straightened it swiftly, and jerked a blanket over it.

Only then did he remember the window. The door he had closed, the window stood open. He saw no one there; a flood of mellow moonlight lay across the deep sill. Stepping softly, catlike for silence and quickness, he crossed the room. If any one had seen, Blondino would like to know now.

His shoulders twitched once spasmodically, as though he mastered an involuntary shudder; he saw no one, yet

he was far from satisfied. Had it not been for the bars he would have leaped through the window and investigated every shadow.

Then he heard some one at the door and stepped away from the window. It was the man Estrada whom he had commanded to bring some brandy. The man, seeing the blanket-covered form on the bed, stared incredulously. Then he fell back suddenly, crossing himself.

"Yes, he's dead," said Blondino coolly. "The bullet must have cut some major artery. Perrigo knew that his death was upon him. He had asked for the priest."

"It's too late now," said Estrada stupidly.

"Yes," agreed Blondino, "it's too late now. Whatever my Little Monkey had to say to the padre, or to another, has to go unsaid. Come, Estrada, you and I will drink the brandy. Then I must go to Castañares and learn how he takes it upon himself to kill my friends. As for you, go tell the girl that it's all over here."

Estrada, who had been one of Blondino's horsemen to arrive just after Perrigo fell, clanked away in the heavy spurs which he had not yet thought to remove. Blondino brushed his mustaches upward with the back of his hand, set his wide sombrero at a belligerent angle, and strode off for his postponed word with Castañares.

El Topo had obeyed orders. He and Castañares were in the latter's room, a key turned in the lock. At Blondino's command El Topo opened the door. There was a look of perplexity in his eyes.

"I am not sure of anything any longer, *Capitan,*" he made haste to say as Blondino, hands on hips, legs wide apart, stood staring at the man of the scarred face. "I am not even sure that it was Señor Castañares who fired that shot. He denies it; we could find no weapon—"

"Tell me all about it, Señor Castañares," said Blondino.

There was a far-away look in the habitually sad eyes which Castañares brought to bear upon his questioner. He had been sitting dejectedly, staring at the painting of the long dead Señora Castañares.

"You see, señor, all day I have been expecting her to return. It is growing late now." He sighed. "Well, I heard a voice outside; I was so sure that it was her voice, I ran out. There was some one on the edge of a moonbright spot. Was it really my señora, señor?"

"It was only the girl, La Güera," said Blondino, eyeing him sharply. "What happened?"

"I called out to her. The man Perrigo ran after me and tried to hold me back. I threw him off. He was beside himself, señor, acting like a man gone mad. What ailed him I could not understand. We struggled; he had a knife and lifted it. I saw his eyes. They were terrible. He meant to kill me."

"Go on," said Blondino sternly. "He tried to knife you and you shot him?"

Castañares grew impatient.

"What nonsense. What should I shoot him with? My finger? I had no weapon. No, I did not shoot him; he himself will tell you that—"

"He will tell nothing. He is dead."

An exclamation broke from El Topo. Castañares looked mildly surprised and murmured:

"Now, I am sorry for that. I did not like the man, but to have him killed—and here at my place!" His old sad look came back into his eyes. "It seems to me, señor, that so much misfortune happens here."

"If not you, then who shot my Perrigo?" asked Blondino.

Castañares made his little helpless gesture, lifting both hands and letting them drop listlessly.

"But I have said already that I do not know who it was. It was too dark where he stood, under a big tree just beyond where she—"

"What's that?" cut in Blondino. "You saw a man there?"

"No. I cannot say that, señor. My eyes were all for her. I was so sure— And it was so dark where he stood—"

"How do you know, then, some one was there?"

"I saw the flash of his pistol, of course. How the others could have failed to see it, I don't even understand."

"So there was some one lurking in the garden, then? And he saw you and Perrigo quarreling, and took it on himself to interfere? Now, I had a great fondness for my Perrigito, you know that. For more than twenty years, when I saved him from a very hasty hanging, he has been like a good watchdog to me. And some one has shot him!"

He turned to El Topo.

"Is this how you run my place in my absence?" he demanded, his blue eyes all of a sudden become blue fires. "Do you want me to slit your fat, greasy throat for you? Who has been here that could do this? What man—"

He saw how El Topo stared back at him; less mole than bulky human toad did the man look now. Fear pricked him even as the first quick, true suspicion awoke within his mind.

"There was a stranger here to-night! A little before all this happened he went outside; to the stable, he said, to look at his horse! I suspected him of planning some evil—but not against Pedro! For the moment, I swear it,

I had even forgotten him! May the devil fly away with me—"

"Sew up your buttonhole of a mouth, fat fool!" stormed Blondino in such an access of fury as to make El Topo spring backward and look wildly about him for an avenue of escape. "As to the devil flying away with you, that has a prophetic ring to it, *mozo!* One man dead already to-night, and does it dawn on you that my little Monkey may grow lonely in the dark, and ask for the company of the man through whose negligence he is dead?"

El Topo began to look truculent now. Cornered, he would be not without courage. He began to bluster.

Just then Estrada looked in through the door.

"There is a stranger here, señor," he said to Blondino, "who asks for a word with you."

Blondino whirled about expectantly, demanding:

"A stranger? Who or what is he?"

Estrada looked to be both puzzled and touched by an exhilarating interest as he answered:

"He names himself El Gabilan! The Capitan Colorado!"

"That is the one!" cried El Topo.

Blondino was mute a moment, frowning incredulously. Then he swore roundly and fluently and then, at last breaking into a loud laugh, he flung about and stamped out to come to grips with the man who had shot a watchdog of his. What he had said was true; in a way he had had a great fondness for little Perrigo.

CHAPTER VI

"NO MAN, BUT THE DEVIL! I SMELLED SULPHUR WHEN HE CAME!"

SURPRISE had its shock in store for both men. When Julian Hawk and Victor Blondino confronted each other in the main *sala* of the old Hidden Hacienda, dark brows and blond brows rose sharply, prompted by like emotions; stern dark eyes and stern blue eyes, clashing, glinted with understanding of the remarkable thing which each had discovered.

Blondino spoke first, exclaiming curiously:

"Captain Colorado, eh? *An American!*"

"And you!" returned Julian Hawk. "I did not know that."

Blondino burst into loud laughter.

"I've heard of you, whatever your name is," he cried out. "And I quite naturally supposed you were Mexican. And here I find you— If you really are El Gabilan Colorado! And not some fresh bounder, playing jokes."

"My name happens to be Hawk. Julian Hawk, if you'd have the whole of it. Maybe, you recall having heard it before now?"

"I'm no great hand for names," said Blondino indifferently. "It's the man that counts with me. Well, I'm honored," and he grinned impudently. "Just the same it happens that this is a busy night for me. I ought to be in the saddle now for a good sixty-mile run of it, and so I'll ask you what the devil brings you from your own hunting grounds to cross trails with me."

"Maybe I'm riding the same direction—if it be to the Blue Smokes that you're heading!"

Again was Blondino frankly surprised.

"Now who's been whispering secrets?" he demanded, and looked not in the least pleased.

"A thing like that can't be kept secret," retorted Hawk.

"No, I guess not," grumbled Blondino. "Well, all the more reason to cut matters short. What are you here for?"

Julian Hawk once more had his cloak thrown over his shoulders; his sombrero was in his hand. He clapped it on, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and said coolly:

"Riding this way, I was tempted to tarry a moment, to treat myself to the pleasure of killing you."

"What!" roared Blondino, and on the instant whipped out the heavy weapon tugging at his belt. In his time he had looked into many a grim and implacable face, but never into one more dangerously determined than that confronting him now. Had Julian Hawk then so much as twitched a muscle he must assuredly have sealed his own death warrant; for Blondino was hair-trigger set for murder.

"Go ahead," he jeered, having the top hand now, and keen and quick and sure enough to keep it. "If you've mapped out any nice little playful evening like that for yourself, don't scrap it on my account."

"No, not on your account," said Hawk. "Certain considerations having suggested themselves, I am inclined to yield a point."

"To forego your anticipated pleasure?" jeered Blondino. "Or, perhaps, merely to postpone it?"

"Ah," said Hawk.

Blondino stared, and for a moment did nothing but stare.

"You're a cool hand, my friend," he said thoughtfully after a while.

Julian Hawk smiled contemptuously back at him.

"I have need to be," he agreed equitably. "In my business, you know."

"Now, I wonder if you're a nut? Crazy as old Castañares in there? In any case, I'm not going to waste a lot of time on you. If you think you want my scalp, go after it! I'll take you on, you or any other man, and do no grouching about a few minutes squandered on a busy night. Pull your gun—or pull your freight. Which?"

"I'll be going presently—"

"Here, you," cut in Blondino, bethinking himself. "About my little playmate, Perrigo—you're the man that killed him for me!"

"Don't be an ass, Blondino," grunted the other.

"What do you mean by that? Mean you didn't do it?"

"Of course I didn't. What's more, you know it!"

Blondino repeated himself in words, though with a new, suspicious meaning, as he rasped out:

"What do you mean by that?"

Julian Hawk shrugged most elaborately.

"One free captain, in the good old-fashioned parlance, doesn't need to stand for a lot of high-hand from another. I'm not here to answer fool questions. If I had a certain bit of business with you, or thought that I had, I've done my thinking over from another angle. Maybe I've decided it would be fun to run you a race to the Blue Smokes—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind! I'm of a mind to have

a free hand there. What if I drilled you right now, square between the eyes?"

"First, I wish you'd call in your man, El Topo. I asked him to hold some money for me; he has about five thousand dollars of mine."

Again did Blondino stare. And then a second time he burst out laughing, though not in the least did his vigilance relax or his suspicion dwindle.

"You handed El Topo a wad like that to hold for you? And I just asked if you were crazy!"

"We had a dinky game at dice. El Topo lost all he had in his tin box and refused to dig any deeper. I thought that when you blew in you might not be as timid as he was. I'm only now in the position to learn at first hand what sort of a man you are; but I've heard that you have been known to play for sizeable stakes."

"Why should I hazard a wad that's already as good as mine?" Blondino chuckled.

"Meaning that you'd keep what El Topo holds and refuse to give me a game?" Hawk shrugged. "Very well."

"You don't mind losing a penny or two, do you? A mere five thousand, that's nothing to you, eh?"

"Right you are," said Hawk. "If I confess to disappointment, it is that I am deprived of the pleasure of cleaning you."

All this while they had had the big rooms to themselves. Those other men who had gamed here earlier in the evening, and who had been interrupted by the shot which felled Pedro Perrigo, had not returned. Evidently, of like minds to be free from any possible implication or even mere publicity, these gentlemen had quietly taken their hats and their departures. Nor had any of Blondino's horsemen entered; from the stables they would

doubtless troop into that other part of the house where they might jog elbows along the cheap bar and drink of such liquors as were meant for them.

"I ask you again," jeered Blondino, "why I should risk what's already the same as mine? Five thousand may be nothing to you; I'll confess that I find it a fair day's wage."

A fuller, richer contempt stamped itself upon Hawk's features.

"I'm inclined to be disappointed in you," he said disgustedly. "If you feel that way, I don't know that I mind making you a present of the thing—"

"Oho! My fine fellow goes about tossing the thousands to those who chance on him in his generous moods!"

"I met up with a beggar last night. He asked for a couple of reales; I gave him a couple of thousands. To-night I meet up with a fellow called Blondino—" He broke off to stare as insolently as ever Blondino stared at his most insolent best. "If you *are* Blondino," he added, as one beginning to doubt.

Men who live rough-and-tumble lives are very often boys even into the full surge of mid-manhood. Perhaps each one of these two men, each with a reputation of sorts, held some strange, distorted respect for the other; or, if not that, for something, some quality, in that other. If so, what more natural than that each should show the other the full of his contempt?

Blondino, without turning or withdrawing his watchful eyes from his visitor's face, shouted out at the top of his lungs, calling El Topo. And El Topo came at a run, not knowing what to expect.

"This man who names himself El Colorado," snapped Blondino, "says that you hold some five thousand of his money. How about it?"

"It is the truth, señor. Here it is, too. He handed it to me just before he went out to the stable." The mole-eyes flickered; a grin twitched the small round mouth. "He was afraid that outside some one who knew might rob him!"

Julian Hawk stirred for the first time; to step to the table by a certain window and sit down.

"Give him his money," commanded Blondino. "Bring the dice. Bring the candles over here. See that all the doors are locked." He flung down a key which came from some inner pocket. "Bring me my strong box, El Topo."

El Topo hastened away with the key. Julian Hawk's eyes followed him expectantly. Blondino laughed.

"No, my friend, you're not to see where it's kept. Not in this room, you may be sure."

Hawk made no rejoinder. He seemed slightly bored as he rolled his cigarette. Presently El Topo returned carrying a small japanned box under his arm. He put it down on the table, and at Blondino's command, being given the second key, opened it. Hawk's eyes examined the contents in frank interest; Blondino's never for a second left Hawk's face.

"One more thing, El Topo," commanded Blondino. "This game is to be of a few minutes only. Tell my men; we ride immediately to the Blue Smokes Mountains; which is to say, we cross the border into the States. Of course you knew; but this Johnny Hawk might as well learn from me that we don't fear his own knowing! Before I go, by the way, I want a word with La Güera. And the padre is to await me."

"*Si señor,*" said El Topo, and slowly withdrew.

All the while Blondino held his weapon ready for in-

stant use in his right hand. Hawk appeared to smile at his precaution.

"The dice, now," he suggested. "I've heard it's unlucky for a right-handed man to throw them left-handedly!"

"I'll take a chance," said Blondino.

They placed their bets, Blondino always left-handedly and a trifle awkwardly, with an equal mind toward high stakes. Hawk at all times kept his two hands above the table.

"To make a funny gesture," Blondino warned him, "is to get yourself drilled, Mr. Red Hawk. I wouldn't mind at that," and seeming to grow in high good humor his grin broadened, "since that way I'd come by your five thousand in all honesty and without risk, merely annexing something without an owner."

"A thousand a throw?" suggested Hawk.

"Suits me," agreed Blondino.

For the second time that night it appeared that luck stood at Hawk's elbow. He lost a bet now and then; he suggested doubling and Blondino nodded; he won again. His five thousand became ten thousand. There was still money in Blondino's box. Blondino grew keener-eyed at every instant, tenser—more strongly tempted, one would have said. Blue murder shone in his eyes. Well, why not? Here was a man before him who had threatened trouble; here was not only that man's money, but Blondino's own. And certainly Blondino had shown himself, not only to-night, ready for any act that furthered Blondino's own fortunes.

"Come again?" said Hawk in his cool, even tone. He rattled the dice thoughtfully. his left hand, too, Blondino made certain, was in full evidence on the table-top. "Here goes then; a real throw—"

As he flung the dice he threw his arm out to the side so that the candles were swept clean of the table and thrown halfway across the room, which on the instant was pitch dark. To be sure Blondino pressed the trigger even as the thing was being done. He fired three times before he paused. He even listened for a falling body. Then he fired again and bethought him to conserve his lead. For nothing was surer than that he had missed his man. With an almost incredible swiftness had he fired, yet with an even greater swiftness had the man across the table leaped to one side. Which side? Blondino, having tried right and left, saved his powder and moved swiftly himself, not to be caught by the other man's fire.

"El Topo!" he shouted. "Lights! Men! Oh, I'll wring your neck for you, my little Red Hawk," and again skipped aside in the dark. Yet no answering shot came.

So again he shouted for lights and men, and a moment later doors opened, candles appeared held cautiously, and a half-dozen of Blondino's riders came into the room.

"Shut the doors behind you!" roared Blondino. "Don't let him run for it. A hundred pesos to the one that brings him down. He's hiding behind a sofa—in a corner—"

"He's nowhere!" ejaculated El Topo after the first flurry, and crossed himself hurriedly, muttering: "No man," El Topo began muttering, "but the devil! I smelled sulphur when he came!"

"You'll smell sulphur in hell in two minutes!" roared out Blondino, driving his men to the search again. Yet with six or eight men seeking another in any room, though large like this one, it was less than the two minutes which Blondino had given El Topo, when others of the Mexicans crossed themselves.

There came a gasp from El Topo.

"The money, señor! That was on the table there. Where is it?"

And then even Victor Blondino, perhaps because of the electrified and superstitious men surrounding him, felt a pricking of the flesh like that which may come at midnight to a timid man in a churchyard. The money, save for a few scattered coins, was gone.

"The Captain Gabilan. Oh, I have heard tales of him; of terrible deeds that no man on earth could do. They say of him that he is the devil himself—"

Blondino, in one of his most terrible rages, stormed up and down, his eyes red with a sudden rush of hot blood.

"Run through the house; look everywhere. He's slipped through some door. Through the gardens; you, Estrada and Tonio and Luis, run to the stables. He is not to get away. A thousand, five thousand dollars to the man who gets him for me."

They sped swiftly enough, driven by fear of Blondino, drawn on by lust of Blondino's money. Through every room of the house, through the patio, through the gardens, into and around the stables. And after a little while Blondino found several of them huddled together, speaking in whispers, not a man of them willing to go alone to him with all that they had learned. But at last he had it from them all together.

Julian Hawk was gone. His horse was gone.

And that was not the half of it. Of course, Blondino's money had taken unto itself wings. But there was more. Blondino's own favorite horse, ready saddled for him to ride to-night, was missing. And, in their wide search, they had stumbled upon another fact: La Güera, too, had vanished.

"It is the devil's work, you may be sure of it," they maintained.

They were treated to the rare spectacle of Blondino absolutely speechless with rage. He choked; one near him could hear the throat muscles working. He breathed with difficulty. It was a wonder that some blood vessel did not give way, bursting wide, to such a surge of blood. He tried to speak and could not. And so it was with never a single word that he presently led the way to the saddled horses.

Once in the saddle, however, a sudden change came over the man. He pulled off his hat and sat straight, the moonlight brightening his head of flaxen hair, his eyes lifted toward the softly bright sky. He dipped his spurs and rode at a gallop, his men straggling after him. And he gave them a sudden rollicking burst of his laughter for them to think upon.

"A girl is gone, but she's only a girl," he cried out carelessly. "Same for a horse, same for a handful of money. Who the devil cares? There's more of all to be had —and never fear, we'll come up with our Captain Hawk in the Blue Smokes Mountains."

He began singing, and his riders, all of whom had drunk swiftly and well, joined in with him.

CHAPTER VII

SHADOWS FROM THE PAST

Blondino, with his ragged following, went trooping away into the north, across the border and into a land which, under the argent moon, looked like a billowing silver sea. Far off, straight ahead, some thirty-odd miles away, was the Little Mesa country, toward which they made a bee-line on the first leg of a sixty-mile run.

Julian Hawk watched them ride out of sight, then quitted the grove of cottonwoods in which he had lingered on the edge of the barranca, a pistol shot removed from the Hacienda, and rode slowly toward the village. It grew late, and Nacional slept. The Hacienda itself was suddenly plunged into darkness and silence, and in the little town all lights, saving those of the Poco Mas saloon, were extinguished.

Except for the horseman there appeared to be but one moving figure on the dusty, moonlit street. Here went the padre who had been summoned at Blondino's order and who only now returned to his bed. Hawk watched him a moment thoughtfully, then spurred after him.

"A word with you, father," he said, and touched his hat.

The priest stopped and looked up at him curiously. He was a very old man, already more than eighty at this time, and gentle, tolerant, and kindly, which is to say, wise in his own loved lore. This Father Juan, who had come many, many years ago from Spain, full of hot

fervor then, serene with deep, dispassionate calm now, was dreaming his own dreams in the white, silent night. He knew of murder recently done, yet the grave eyes uplifted to a mounted stranger were untroubled. He had looked too often upon the turmoil which men make for themselves, and saw too clearly through them and beyond.

"Yes, my son?" he spoke placidly.

Hawk dismounted to walk at his side.

"You are going home now?"

"Yes."

"May I come with you?"

"It grows late, my son." They walked along side by side for a few steps, and the priest spoke again. "You are in trouble?"

"Do only those who are in trouble come to you?" asked Hawk curiously.

Father Juan's laughter was almost childlike, so clear and natural was it.

"For the most part, to be sure. But that is as it should be, *no sñor?* It is the hurt child or the sickly that cries for his parents."

Hawk nodded moodily.

"It's the misfortunate ones who cry out to God!"

"God understands all that, my son," retorted the priest.

"You have many unfortunates among your parish?" said Hawk, a shade curtly.

The old hands were lifted and opened and allowed to drop resignedly.

"Were that not true I should have gone back to Spain fifty years ago!"

"*Bueno!*" cried Hawk. "It is of them I'd talk with you. You will manage to spare me ten minutes?"

The old eyes could become shrewd with speculation upon occasion. He chuckled and led the way.

"A dozen steps or so and we are there. You come from the place of that Mad Blondino?"

"He is mad, then?"

"Of a common madness, I fear," said the old man sternly. "They name him the Laughing Devil. He sent for me to-night, and I went because I go to all men. But I think, had not God intervened to rout his evil schemes, it must have been none other than the poor old Father Juan who would have done so."

"It was a matter of marriage?"

"You know of it, do you? Well, here we are."

It was an ancient adobe house in a small, dreary garden of a few dusty shrubs and a few flowering roses. He opened a door, fumbled on a shelf and lighted a candle. With this in his hand, he led the way into a small, bare room; bed and chair and crucifix furnished it. The chair he offered courteously to his guest, himself sitting on the foot of the bed.

Julian Hawk turned out the contents of a pocket upon the bed-cover. There was a sprinkling of silver, a considerable heap of bank-notes.

"For your unfortunates, if you will accept for them of me, padre," he said. And stood back to look at Father Juan's astonished face.

"But, my son! There are hundreds—thousands—!"

"No matter. It is for your poor. Not for the Church itself, mind you. For your most needy; for the women who have babies and grief, for the children, for any who have felt the iron heel."

"It is a generous gift. It would benefit many who are deserving." He divided his interest equally between the gift and the giver. Suddenly a smile, for the first time causing him to look timid and shy, played across the old face. "They say in your own country—for you are

American, are you not, señor?—that one should not look too narrowly at the teeth of a horse that is given away! Yet—"

"Yet you do not know who I am? Nor where the money comes from?"

Father Juan, still smiling, nodded, and nodding, sighed.

"Does that matter?" demanded Hawk sharply.

"I trust not! Yet—"

"A second *yet*," exclaimed Hawk impatiently. "Meaning that there are possible ways by which money might come which would lead even a good cause to be hands-off!"

"For instance, should this turn out to be stolen money—"

"You may be sure of that, father!"

"Eh? Stolen?"

"Most surely. But, unfortunately, it would be impossible for us to restore it to the true owners—if such stuff ever does have a real owner!"

"I think, my son," said the priest, beginning to rub his nose reflectively, "that you'd better tell me the story."

Julian Hawk, too, appeared to reflect. Then he demanded abruptly:

"You have heard, perhaps, of a certain El Gabilan? Captain Colorado? What if it came as a free gift from such a man?"

Father Juan made a gesture of repugnance.

"He is another like the one men call the Laughing Devil; a man steeped in evil, dyed with blood. A bad man even in my eyes, who am greatly patient and tolerant, I think. Could a man of the Church accept offerings from one like that?" Something very like an utterly human anger flamed briefly in his dark, deep-set eyes. "And would such a man, fearful, perhaps, for his own

soul standing astounded in contemplation of his own crimes, think thus to purchase God's forgiveness? If, señor, you—"

He broke off and started back, suddenly comprehending.

"You! You are this bandit!"

Not in fear, certainly, rather in blazing indignation, did he rise, a quivering arm outstretched, his attitude and look that of an incensed priest about to spill the outpourings of the Church's curses on the head of the vile and ungodly. Julian Hawk watched him curiously and lifted his own hand at last to say sternly:

"'Judge not,' father! Such are your own preachings. I'll tell you the story. It is for your ears only."

Father Juan sat down again, though half reluctantly. And Hawk, leaning closer, speaking in a monotonous undertone, told the story for the first time in all these years. Told much, in fact, before he had ended the straightforward recital, which he had had no thought to tell. And when he had finished, Father Juan sat pondering, neither frowning nor smiling.

"Fifty years ago, had a man come to me with such a tale, I could have judged swiftly. I could have condemned or upheld and had no doubts. But now, señor? Now I grow older; I do not condemn so readily and I do not become excited over a hatful of money and I do not claim to know all of our Father's most secret intentions and very last minute inspirations! Let me think—"

He sat with bowed head; he may have been in prayer. Of a sudden he lifted his eyes to his visitor's face, saying simply:

"Let me look into your eyes, my son."

Julian Hawk met his regard steadily. The old man

cocked his head to one side, pursed his lips, narrowed a bright eye and made the frankest study of him. And at last his sunny smile played over his features again.

"I accept the gift, señor," he said. "I even think that something of the giver, the true owner, goes with it."

Hawk inclined his head gravely.

"I'll not keep you up much longer," he said. "But, if I may extend our ten minutes—"

"All night, if you like."

"No. A question or two, if you can answer and care to do so. And a bit of news which you shall use your own judgment in spreading. The questions first: Will you tell me what you know of Señor Castañares?"

"But I know everything! And there is no reason on earth why I should not tell it all to you." He sighed and shook his head, already forgetful of the heap of riches on the bed. "Listen, señor; here is my poor Inocente Castañares' story."

He told it quite simply. It was, after all, a thing of long ago. Tragic then, it remained tragic now, yet the years had had their way, the wearing years which tool and carve and remodel at human experience like the desert winds laboring eternally at granite shaft and lava block.

Castañares, a young man then, inherited from his grandfather the magnificent Castañares estate. There was the old home, the present Hacienda Escondida, and the five hundred acres particularly belonging to it; there were the further acres, ten thousand of them all together. Over all this young Castañares had lorded it in the good old-fashioned way. Not a bad boy at all, Father Juan would have understood; wild, perhaps, full-blooded, but no viciousness in him.

And even his inherent wildness showed signs of de-

parting after young Castañares found his beloved. She, like Señor Colorado, was American, her father a big rancher whose properties adjoined the Castañares acres. They were young romantics, those two. They were very gay, and, what was better, very happy at the Hacienda Escondida, with many friends at times and at other times just themselves and their children. Four children, like bright blossoms as Father Juan remembered them.

Then the tragic night after which nothing was ever to be the same at the old Hacienda. A band of drunken bandits led by a cold-blooded, merciless devil, raided the place. They filled their hands with loot; there was always money, gold and silver in bounty, in the Castañares strong-box, and that, too, went. Blooded horses driven away, an old servant knocked in the head, another knifed. And behold, Castañares himself and his wife and children beginning to pray only to escape with their lives.

Father Juan's voice faltered. He hardly more than whispered the rest: he left wide gaps between his words, gaps which his listener could not but fill in for himself, reading the horror in the old face. The young wife had been seen, though her husband sought to hide her—the devil who led this seven times accursed attack dragged her out to display before his slavering brutes. Castañares, with only a knife, attacked a room full of armed men—his little son, only seven, found a gun. They were all wiped out that night, those unfortunate ones. Only Don Inocente himself lived through it, and you see what they left of him? Even he, at first, they thought dead—such blows as that man endured before his body was beaten into insensibility. Those scars of to-day on his face and head gave oh, so little idea—

It was months before any one looked to him to keep

on living. Yet now he seemed a strong man again. Sane, too, in all but the one thing: All through his days and nights, through each hour of them, he looked for the return of his beloved. The children he appeared to have forgotten; through some queer mental quirk he always harked back to the first days of the golden honeymoon, those halcyon days in paradise when he had first brought his "Señora" home. Daily he gathered fresh roses to place in the vase before the pictured image of Juana Castañares; at every moment he harkened for her return.

"Blondino's work, that cursed night raid?" demanded Hawk, a stern eagerness shining in his eyes.

"Why Blondino's work?" asked Father Juan, mildly surprised. "There is nothing of which I know to connect him with that atrocity. It is not that I put him above the commission of such a crime; there is no evil too evil for Victor Blondino to dabble in. But you will remember that that was many years ago; Blondino, as I recall, was not even heard of here-abouts."

"Yet the property would appear to have dropped nicely into his hands?"

"Not all of it. And that quite naturally. I am telling you about it."

It would appear that, some months after the tragedy, Castañares returned to his home, a whole man once more physically, and quite normal mentally save for the one obsession. Then, for the first time, thought the priest, Blondino was heard of. He was reputed a reckless gambler long before a more sinister reputation became widespread. It was over cards that Don Inocente lost his money, his stable, his old home itself. And there is no doubt that he would have lost everything, the other

ten thousand acres, had not two governments stepped in to save him.

"So something was salvaged?"

"Those ten thousand acres. The courts ruled that Señor Castañares was not competent mentally to dispose of his own properties; it was impossible, it appears, to go back behind the deeding of the Hacienda Escondida to Blondino, but guardians were appointed, and since that day poor Castañares has been unable to commit himself to any further folly of that sort."

"I see. And, so long as he lives, the court will manage his properties for him. Should he die?"

"Having no heirs, everything goes to the State," said Father Juan dryly. "So, my son, you see that the State has the very best of good reasons for guarding this poor gentleman's interests well! The three things which may make desert lands extremely valuable—water and oil and minerals—are potential factors in this case. Well, anyway, it is a good thing that that man Blondino finds himself against a stone wall in this case."

"H'm," said Hawk, more thoughtful than ever.

Then he rose, preparing to go.

"You know that the man Perrigo is dead?"

"Yes. He was not a good man, that little Perrigo, yet there was some good left in him. God will understand."

"It was I who shot him to-night," said Hawk.

Father Juan sprang up and recoiled.

"You have killed a man within the hour and then come to me as you do!"

"I did not say that I killed him. I could easily have done so, too. I had thought myself done with talk of myself, padre, yet there remains this to add."

Very briefly he told of the altercation between Perrigo and Señor Castañares. How Castañares seemed much excited, seeing La Güera in the moonlight; how Perrigo, running out to them, appeared also tremendously excited; how it was to save Castañares' life that Julian Hawk fired the shot which brought Perrigo down—

"Yet," faltered the old man, deeply concerned, more and more mystified, "you say that you did not kill him!"

"Blondino again! Blondino, afraid that Perrigo would tell something to you—and to the girl, La Güera. Just as Perrigo, I think, was afraid that Castañares knew something and was about to tell her! What is that something, do you think, father?"

"But I do not understand! What is this of Blondino that you hint at, señor?"

He listened astounded to the deliberate, curt explanation.

"To-morrow," said Hawk, "you will return to the place where the man Perrigo lies. You will take a doctor with you. He will make his examination and tell you that my bullet scarcely put the man in danger. He will tell you, further, that Blondino's fist crushed the skull; smashed it in like an eggshell."

Father Juan, despite all those long years of his into which so much of the iniquity of man had entered, sank back on his bed, looking up piteously.

"Is there never to be an end? Can such a man as this inhuman wretch Blondino go on and on—"

"I think not!" cut in Julian Hawk grimly. "And now I will go, father. With this little bit of news which I promised you, and which you may tell, at your discretion, where you think it may do the most good. Blondino and his men are riding now to the Blue Smokes Mountains, which is to say some fifty or sixty miles off

to the north-east. You know them? It is rumored that a rich gold strike has been made there. Those who come first may or may not make fortunes. You know how these things go? Hundreds of men will know to-morrow; thousands before another day. Now, I have told you all I know; I had this much only in a few muttered words overheard an hour ago from the men changing horses at Blondino's stable. And they had but recently heard of it. How much is true, how much false in the rumor some few hours now are going to tell."

He inclined his head gravely, said his quiet "*Buenas noches, padre,*" and went out to his horse.

CHAPTER VIII

INTO THE DESERT

THE silver sea that was the desert actually appeared to stir softly in little silent ripples under the white moon. It was a vast expanse dotted with its own tiny islands, a dark clump of mesquite, a barren hillock crowned with rust-red rock. There were places where the sand under the horse's hoofs was as white as the tender foam that creams along ocean beaches. The rider progressed slowly, having a thought to his horse and to the many waterless miles which extended before him; from a distance he would have appeared something dark drifting north with some quiet tide.

And such a tide did actually set in to-night—that of human endeavor and rivalry and, above all, lust for gold. A scant handful of men, far ahead, led the way, the very crest of an onrushing billow which would lash some distant rock-bound slopes with a boom like that of thundering billows belaboring a coast of cliffs. If that rumor of gold were true, if such gold had been uncovered as the tale had it, the onrush of this first wave of humanity would be succeeded by others, mightier, even swifter; there would be the swirl of eddies in which man would drown, the dashing aloft of spume and spray; concussion and recoil and all the attendant activities of that other ancient war of the seas against the dry land.

Much of what might occur Julian Hawk foresaw. If the tale were a true tale, word of it would travel mysteriously. Men would come from all directions, all classes and conditions of men. He knew how it would be because he had lived through such times. Down in Mexico,

far from the border, he had had his first experience with this sort of thing. That had been seven years ago. He had been the first that time; he himself had made the discovery, had staked the first claim, had sent word to his friends. And then, as now, a figure loomed on the horizon, sinister and evil and sheathed in might—the figure of Blondino.

Was human experience, which is to say history in detail, so limited and restricted that it must become parrot-like, repeating itself here after those seven years ago in Mexico? Below the border or above, gold was gold, and men remained what they were. Given a wild, remote spot like the Blue Smokes, given the yellow temptation and the human tide setting in so strong, what could a man expect? Given a Blondino in the very van, a Julian Hawk riding implacably in his wake, the only question at stake must concern itself alone with the result of the clash. Blondino surrounded himself with his men; Hawk rode alone. . . .

Hawk knew this country well enough to suit his present needs. He had even prospected it, somewhat superficially, passing through on his way down into the heart of old Mexico those seven years ago. Except superficially, few men prospected it these later years, for the land of the Little Mesa country and of the Blue Smokes beyond, and all those grim, forbidding desert miles which rippled and ran in between, had been given up by the fortune-seekers long and long ago. When one had left little, wicked Nacional a scant half-dozen miles behind he entered the desolate wastes. There were blazing white stretches of sand, winnowed and riffled by the winds; pebble-lined gullies where some gaunt, gray vegetation grew; thorny, unlovely plants, small of leaf and thick of bark, waging war against Nature's law of evaporation, questing afar with iron roots for moisture hidden from

man and beast; harsh jungles of greasewood—and long, dreary, sandy areas embracing it all. The prospector and his burros and canteens had crossed and criss-crossed all this desolation, cursing it and standing up against its curse of him, and in the end had named it hell's annex and had done with it. All of which Julian Hawk, having served his own time at the game, knew full well.

And he knew, too, that the waste lands had their tricks and gold its yellow mockery; that a region prospected a hundred times might reveal itself a bonanza at the hundred and first. Gold and water! Sometimes one, sometimes the other the precious and desirable, the thing for which men gave everything, their lives often enough. The desert and its mesas and mountains and fierce barrancas gave both, withheld both. Gave in silent mockery, withheld fiendishly. It forced men to trade in the two commodities; one who had started out to stake his life for gold might end the game yearning to exchange a fortune chanced upon for a dipperful of brackish water missed.

Musing upon many matters as he rode deeper and deeper into the vast hush of the desert, Julian Hawk never once entirely forgot Blondino, for nothing was more certain than that Blondino would not be forgetting him so soon. The Laughing Devil, though he spurred on in advance, and, no doubt, at a harder pace, would say to himself that Hawk either led the way or followed. So Blondino would watch in front—and might well be expected to keep an eye toward the rear. He could spare a man or two, ordering them to drop back as a rear-guard, always with a nice little ambush in mind. And so at every step Hawk rode warily, suspicious of all possible lurking-places, keen-eyed for mesquite thickets and every crease and dimple of the rare, occasional hills. He was grateful for the moon for company.

And still other company, altogether unexpected, he was to have before long. Coming up over one of the low, gentle, billow-like swells of earth, he stopped his horse to stare at the sight which the moonlight revealed. A rakish, long-bodied buckboard which seemed to have no earthly business here, horseless and absurd, rested at the end of the scarcely decipherable wheel tracks which it itself had made. An old man—Hawk, spurring on again, saw the big, square, white beard, the long white hair—sat dejectedly humped over on the seat.

But almost at the same moment the old man saw him. At an abrupt end was all indication of age and despondency. At a bound the big boots struck earth, there was a whoop as of pure joy, and here at a run, arms waving, came he of the reverend beard. Hawk's horse rose promptly on its hind legs and, but for a severe grip on the reins, would have put its whole heart into running away. Whereupon the old man, though he still shouted, came forward somewhat more decorously.

"If both sane and sober," muttered Hawk wonderingly, "then what's the answer?"

"Man!" boomed a particularly deep and melodious voice, though just now vibrant with some tremendous excitement. "There's never again likely to be so lucky a meet-up amongst strangers! Your fortune's made, m' son! I'll lead you into the ways of milk and honey and prime strong liquor to boot. Just light down; just let me have the use of your cow pony—then you come back at old Jawn Cobb for anything on earth, pret' nearly, and it's as good as yourn, hog-tied and delivered. Old King Richard, raving about what he'd hand over for a horse, couldn't auction against me for two fast shakes. Stranger—*light down!*"

Hawk simply reined out of reach.

"Slow does it, old timer," he said sharply. "You

seem all worked up over something. I don't know that it's any of my business, but if it'll relieve you any, I'll listen."

"Americano, huh? Praise Allah for that. I was scared for a minute, taking you all in by moonlight, you might be Mex. Now we're well met, stranger, and all that; but we'll do our chatting about it s'm' other moonlight night. I'm horse-shy and I'm horse-hungry. Light down. Put me up where you set now, pry yourself loose from some of your hardware—and I'll give you the world m' son, with a red ribbon 'round it."

He started forward; Hawk backed his horse off, just out of reach of the long arms.

"As a rule I don't swap horses in the middle of the desert," he said dryly. "Besides, I'm in a hurry. If I can do anything for you—"

"Man! If five hundred dollars is of any use to you—"

"It's not."

"No? H'm. Well— Dammit," he bellowed forth, "Old Jawn Cobb don't have to shoot nickels, no time. Name your price—*and light down!* Name your price, I say. Anything goes."

"No. I don't want your money and I do want my horse."

"Don't happen to be one of the Rockerfeller boys taking a little *pascar?*" grunted old man Cobb.

"If there is anything I can do for you—"

"Haven't I yelled it into your ear loud enough? Haven't I—"

"Anything within reason."

Old Cobb—his name was John, but he would have repudiated that as a wishy-washy cognomen alongside a good he-man name like Jawn—rumpled his long, white hair in evident distress. All he could think of to say was:

"I *got* to have a horse—and I'd like might' well to have a gun!"

"Where are your own horses? What are you doing way out here, in the exact dead center of nowhere, without horses? You didn't pull your wagon yourself, I take it! Turn 'em loose to eat sand and cactus? Let a desert wolf stampede 'em for you?"

Old Jawn Cobb, who, it appeared, when put to it was the possessor of a remarkably forceful vocabulary, took a deep breath, put his head back, lifted his bearded face to the moon—and swore deep and long and resoundingly. Hawk in his time had heard men speak up forcefully, but never a man like this one. And through the barrage of profanity he began to get glimpses of the explanation, like darting half-smothered flames in a thick smoke.

"Some one put you afoot? Stole your horses?"

The old man fell silent and remained silent a few moments. When he spoke again it was quite calmly. He had relieved pressure. Briefly and unemotionally he gave his lucid account of what had happened. Several men, six or eight or so of them, had overtaken him here, riding like a bunch of drunk devils from the south. He expected them to yell and ride by; he even had his notion as to where they were going. Men didn't travel this trail every day in the week. But they didn't do what he expected. They bore down on him, and as they came were busied tying handkerchiefs over their faces. Cobb started to reach for his rifle, but immediately thought better of it. Let them pick his pockets and ride on; he rather guessed he could afford to lose a slim purse to-night if any man could. And a hot chance he'd have had with a crowd like that!"

"Blondino and his cut-throats," grunted Hawk.

"Hey? How's that?" The old man was all eagerness. "Know who they are, m' son?"

"Without the vaguest shadow of a doubt. But let's have it all."

They asked him who he was and where he was going. Informed by him that that was no never-mind of theirs, their spokesman indicated that he could guess. And he guessed right—

"So you're headed for the Blue Smokes?" demanded Hawk.

For a moment old Cobb's profanity threatened to engulf him.

"Have I got everything carved in my face?" he bellowed in a voice to be heard a full mile. "Here you figure you know what I'm up to and all about it. Does the whole blooming world know what I'm up to?"

"If it has anything to do with gold and the Blue Smokes," returned Hawk curtly, "there's many a man that knows."

"Ah," muttered the old man, and spat in disgust, "Dan'l ever was a fool in his ways."

"Dan'l?"

"He's my pardner."

"The man who discovered gold? And sent another man down to Nacional to spread the news?"

"Well, he's spread it, I reckon. Anyway, everybody seems to know more about it than I do. Dan'l sent Chancy Burns down for me where he knew I was heading for supplies. Chancy found me all right—after he'd got drunk first. That's the way news takes its head start gettin' spread, m' son."

"And, when Blondino overtook you—"

"Blondino? So it's a jasper name of Blondino I'm looking up from this time on, is it? I'm obliged for the

name; most likely I'll remember it. Well, be he who he may, as the feller says, this Blondino played me a dirty trick. He said he'd like a little extra time himself in the Smokes before the crowd started in; guessed he'd have to put me afoot. Which he proceeded to do, spite of any small protest on my part, helping himself generous from my supplies,unhooking my ponies and driving them off into yon dim-dam-distances. And you can be sure, stranger, he didn't forget to frisk me for any hardware I might have handy, absconding with my rifle. And here he left me setting. Know what doing, stranger?"

"Swearing, I'd guess, now that I know you," observed Hawk.

"Some, yes. Just at first, though. Then praying. Says I to the good Lord: 'Revenge is Thine, Almighty, and that's all right. Just the same there's going to be a sort of deputy needed, carrying out the divine scheme o' things. Remember my application for the job is first in.' And then along comes you, stranger. And, having heard my petition, I cal'late you'll admit it fair and modest? Just the loan of a horse—"

"Sorry," said Hawk curtly. "Can't be done. But if you can suggest anything in reason, as I said before—"

The old man sighed windily. He seemed all resignation now. The face lifted toward the light seemed the most innocent old face imaginable. Hawk noted this, sensed what was afoot, and again wheeled his horse to a safe distance just as John Cobb made a nimble leap toward the bridle reins.

"I lose," grumbled the old man, and whipped out his pipe, calmly filling it and having it lighted and drawing smoothly before he had finished his few words. "Since it's not the first time I've lost, I quit gentle. But I'll take next best, asking if you'll do this: You're

headed for the Blue Smokes, hey? By way of the Little Mesas, I take it?"

"Yes."

"Been through this region before?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll know the watering-place up there in the Mesas. There's a little ranch there with a bit of livestock on it."

Hawk knew the place well. From here, looking northeastward, he could see the slightly broken country, rising in small hills toward what was loosely known as the Mesa land. Clearly outlined in the bright night light was a tall shaft of rock which stood up as prominently as a church spire over a squatty village, a landmark for many miles in all directions, at the base of which, through a tiny narrow valley, ran a stream of pure water.

"Aye," said Cobb, noting the way he looked, "that's the spot. Sentinel of the Desert they call the high rock. That's where my ranch is, curled around in the gullies up there. There's an old black mule, mean and devilish but a good mule for all that; there's a big white mare. You'll tarry long enough to send those two back here for me."

"Which one will I give the message to?"

"Humorous gent, are you? Well, I hadn't guessed that until right now," snorted old Cobb. "Fu'thermore, there's a shack up there. Inside the shack, sleeping quiet this time o' night, you'll chance on old Sam. Wake him gentle, stranger, as old Sam's a shooting fool when startled. I give you that much warning for your sake as well as mine. Tell him I'm bogged down here, and tell him why and how; mention the black mule and the white mare to him—and I'll go back to my wagon and set and wait and pray some more."

"Fair enough," agreed Hawk, and rode away.

He went up over a sandy hummock and had what he supposed was a last view of John Cobb, standing listlessly by his buckboard sending up ghostly puffs of tobacco smoke. But, crossing a narrow depression, he rode on up a slightly higher ridge and, turning idly in the saddle, saw the old man again. Still standing smoking just as before. But no longer quite alone. Some one was approaching him from a nearby thicket of mesquite, some one who stopped abruptly and seemed to melt again into the earth as Hawk came into view.

He halted and stared back. One of Blondino's men?

But John Cobb had caught sight of him, too, and shouted lustily:

"Breeze on, stranger. Hop to it, can't you? Remember I'm stuck up here until you send old Sam back."

"There's some one there—at the edge of the mesquites," Hawk called back sharply.

A moment of silence. Then an impatient shout from Cobb:

"'S all right, Bright-eyes. It's just my passenger. I run sort of a stage sometimes. Drill on, dammit."

So Julian Hawk rode on. But to himself he remarked dryly:

"Secretive old cuss. Stage? He's a liar, if I know what that means."

He ended with a shrug. What affair of his who Cobb's "passenger" might be, or why all the concealment? And yet though his thoughts went flocking back to Blondino and what might lie ahead in the Blue Smokes or elsewhere, now and again they flitted briefly again to the figure that had appeared to melt away into the desert sands.

CHAPTER IX

THE SENTINEL

THE desert has a thousand moods. It encompasses everything. Utter crushing loneliness, iron hate, savage desolation, venom and fang and thorn, these are of the desert. And so are incredible blossoms from fierce dry stalks, so are slender palms and hidden waterholes. Bleached bones and gold, blazing sands and, above, such a glory of stars as shine nowhere else; through them all the desert cries out or whispers softly.

The Land of the Little Mesas, brooded over by the Sentinel of the Desert, was an oasis, or rather cupped an oasis in its most delightful hollow. Flat topped hills, mounting like irregular steps, gave direction and side walls to a steep, crooked ravine. Several large springs of sweet water gushed up at one end of this ravine and poured their precious crystalline fluid down to constitute a creek which ran for a full mile and then straightway vanished in the sands. At one spot, about midway, the ravine broadened considerably, and the creek wound about a fertile level spot of some half-dozen acres. Here grew enormous ancient cottonwoods, just now in full new tender leaf; here, at this season, the grass was a vivid emerald and wild violets rioted. Just here the walls of the ravine became steep, sheer rock cliffs; directly above the log house, under the cottonwoods, rose the star-aspiring spire of brick-red rock. It was a place where the desert, in characteristic mood, set the barren and hostile in juxtaposition with the tenderly beautiful.

Julian Hawk, entering the widened mouth of the ravine

from the south, stopped at the first pool and watered his horse. While the animal drank, the man looked about him with a sharp and suspicious eye for details. The freshness of dawn was in the air, a very faint, cool breeze riffling the pool and making it glint darkly. The hills, naked of trees, clothed in wiry grass, revealed themselves distinctly; in many places they resolved themselves into bare rock, piled high in fantastic heaps, or standing about as huge individual bowlders. If a man wanted to shoot another man out of his saddle, here was a rarely satisfactory place to lie in wait for him, sure that soon or late he would ride to water and along the ravine. Hawk spurred on, meaning to come to the log cabin while some shreds of dark held to the fringes of the creek.

Here under the cottonwoods it was darker than it had been at any time during the night out upon the open desert. The house itself was just a black mass which, until he rode very close, refused to reveal door or window. As it happened he chanced upon a window first. It was wide open and, leaning from the saddle, he thrust his head through, calling out:

"Hello! Anybody here?"

He should have remembered John Cobb's admonition: he was to "wake old Sam gentle, for he's a shooting fool when startled!" For answer now Hawk had a wild, blood-curdling yell; with it the unmistakable sound of a pair of bare heels landing emphatically upon a plank floor—and Hawk whipped back just in time. There was a roar as of a small cannon as a double-barrelled load of buckshot came swarming through the aperture where an instant before Julian Hawk's head and shoulders had been. He dipped his spurs and half-circled the cabin before he drew rein to shout back angrily:

"You infernal idiot, what do you mean?"

So long was an answer coming, though he repeated his demand, that he began to fear that old Sam in his excitement had blown his own head off. But at last, in a thin, weak, and downright timid voice, came the response:

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"Just a stranger riding by. But with a message from your pardner, Cobb."

Again there was a long silence. Again the voice as timid and hesitant as ever.

"Sorry, stranger, but I was dreaming, sort of. Pretty fierce dream it was, one o' the worst I ever had. There was me in a corner of a dugout, gun in each hand and a knife in my teeth, and there was the other gents, 'bout twenty on 'em, sashaying into me. I clean ripped two-three of 'em wide with my knife—Holy Pete, but how they bled. Then I grabs my trusty rifle—"

"Only it was a shot-gun," grumbled Hawk. "Well, I hope you don't get this way often—or, if you do, that you and I don't ever get into the habit of sleeping in the same room."

"It's just a sort of way I have," said old Sam faintly. "What about Jawn? But, say, first step along in. I'll get a light and put on a pot of coffee. Smell daylight coming up."

"Sure you're wide awake now?"

Old Sam tittered.

"Come along in, stranger; light down, hang your horse to a cottonwood, and step in. Safe as a church, 'specially as I let go with both barrels in my exuberance of spirit, and promise not to reload while you're here. I want to know what's wrong with Jawn."

Cracks of light appeared to indicate that a candle had resulted from the bare-footed prowlings within, which

Hawk could hear all the while the invitation was being offered. Hawk rode to the door, its position betrayed by the same inner glow, and dismounted. The door was unlocked; he stepped in—and filled his eyes with the picturesqueness which was old Sam's.

A man looking upon him for the first time could easily be led into the natural error of thinking him what the side-show barkers would boast of as the tallest and stringiest man in captivity, but that was only because old Sam was so amazingly thin and skeletal that he looked a foot or two taller than he actually was. Bald as an egg and beardless, he wore an enormous white mustache, which drooped about his mouth like a horse-shoe. He had a pair of mismatched eyes, one larger and rounder than the other and of a lighter blue, both of a glassy appearance; you felt that one of them was actually a glass eye, yet it was hard to tell which one. You speculated while appearing to do nothing of the kind; you arrived at the absurdity of suspecting both to be cheap imitation eyes, purchased through a mail-order house.

Old Sam was garbed in a night-shirt which would have been none the worse for laundering; it came half-way down his long, lean shanks, allowing reedy calves and great, flat, bony feet to reveal themselves in frank and shameless abandon. In his hand he carried a lighted candle stuck in a bottle; the effect was that of illuminating and calling attention to his own unblushing charms, his pose absurdly suggestive of the Statue of Liberty.

"Sorry, like I said, that I came pret' near blowing you all part," said old Sam in his dreary, wistful, almost tearful voice.

"Sorry I spoiled your dream," said Hawk, not to be backward in civilities.

"Can't be helped. Say no more." But he sighed, and his eyes—one eye, at least—roved wildly in reminiscence. "Let's call it quits and start friendly; neither man of us meant any harm. Now, tell me about Jawn. Wait until I get the stove going and some clothes on."

He put down his candle, thrust some dry twigs into the old stove, got a blaze going, and made no undue ceremony about dressing. He yanked on a pair of faded overalls, drew on a pair of lop-sided boots; with one practised gesture whipped off his night-shirt and flung it up over a rafter; pulled an equally disreputable shirt on over his head, placed a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles crookedly on his thin, large-nostrilled nose, clapped on a battered straw hat, and stood ready for what the day might bring forth.

"You see," he offered dejectedly, "Jawn's my pardner and all that, and against a pardner it's like a religion with me never to say a contrary word, yet the truth is, and ever was, and ever will be, that Jawn's a helpless sort of feller, and I've got no more to do than let him out of my sight to know he's got in trouble somehow. Not married is he?" he concluded rather sharply.

"Not that I know of," returned Hawk. "Had some one with him, but whether man or woman, I don't know. Said it was a passenger on his stage—"

"Stage! Shucks. Not saying anything against Jawn, he's an awful liar, stranger. Passenger, huh? Now if the old fool has got married— Well, you got to take a lot off'n a pardner, but there's a limit somewhere. And Jawn, the old fool, he's always creeping up might' close to that same dead line."

"I thought that Dan'l, over in the Blue Smokes, was Cobb's pardner?"

"Dan'l is. So'm I."

"And Chancy Burns?"

Old Sam snorted.

"He's off-and-on, Chancy Burns is. Sometimes sort of a halfway pardner, most times not so much as that. Amongst us he's what you might call tolerated. That's the right word. Tolerated. But let's hear about Jawn."

"First, tell me something: Have you heard any men ride by this way during the night?"

"Nary," said old Sam promptly. "Months at the time no man bothers us out this way. Here's a real place for a man, stranger, quiet and peaceful. No; nobody but you has been by here, to my knowledge, for a good long spell. Why should they?"

Hawk ignored the question and gave old Sam the message from his partner, John Cobb. Sam, by this time, was busied over his stove; coffee and bacon and flapjacks were on their way. In perfect unconcern, he received the news.

"Knew the old fool would most likely get involved in some sort of fracas," he admitted at the end of the recital. "Well, I'll go 'long and extricket him, same as usual. There's sugar in that can; no butter, of course. Jawn didn't say, did he, if he was bringing the butter?"

"No," said Hawk. "He didn't say."

"Pull up and dig in; bacon grease on flapjacks does pret' good. And he didn't say, did he, if he'd had any word from Dan'l?"

"Not directly," returned Hawk. "But it is pretty widely known in Nacional that Dan'l sent Chancy Burns down there with word to Cobb that he had found a rich vein of gold."

"That cup leaks, stranger. Jawn ought to bring in some more cups. I hate like poison, personal, to have coffee dribble all over when I'm partaking of it. So

Dan'l struck gold at last, did he? Well, it's high time, if you ask me. Just like the old fool, too, to send Chancy Burns with word of it. Most likely now there'll be a stampede before we're ready for it; trouble, too, I guess." His shiny eyes wandered away to the shot-gun across the foot of his bed. "Well, I'll go get the horse and the mule and drag Jawn along home. Then I'll have to go lend Dan'l a hand. If the other boys had a mite o' gumption, things wouldn't go wrong like that."

"I'd judge," said Hawk, "that this isn't the first time you 'boys' have discovered gold."

Sam looked at him commiseratingly.

"Shucks," he grunted. "What do you s'pose we been doing all our lives? Now, if I had a dollar for ever' time we've had a gold mine, I'd have a right smart heap o' dollars. And we been dead certain for quite a spell we'd uncover it over in the Blue Smokes; yes, it's quite a spell we sort of knowed it was there."

"How long?" asked Hawk curiously.

"Off hand, I'd say twenty-thirty year," answered old Sam evenly. "That's why I bought me this ranch here, to be handy."

"I thought it was Cobb's ranch!"

"Mine. He calls it his; I let him. Awful liar, Jawn is, anyhow."

He finished his breakfast, gnawed off a corner of plug tobacco with stained and wolfish teeth, and went out, calling back casually:

"Make yourself to home, stranger. Stay as long's you like and help yourself generous to whatever you need, only shut the door when you leave."

Julian Hawk followed him out, saw him depart with a rope in one hand and a bait of a handful of grass in the other in quest of the horse and mule, and then went

to his own horse. By this time day was flushing warmly in the east, the moon was pale, the stars gone, and the rugged hills were bathed in the balmy glory of a soft spring morning. Now Hawk's first thought was for his horse, his second for himself, and only the third for Blondino. The golden sorrel was leg-weary, for there had been other miles before the departure from Nacional. Some few hours could be spent to advantage here in this leafy oasis; after all, there was no great need of haste in coming up with Blondino, who already had the head start and who would ride hard and must certainly come first to the Blue Smokes. Hawk, himself, could manage nicely with a bit of sleep.

He unsaddled, watered and picketed his horse among the cottonwoods, took his rifle, and climbed up out of the ravine into the sunshine. From the top of the wall of cliff he had a rare view in many directions; just at his back the Sentinel of the Desert towered up into the clear blue sky. Close at hand the great rock resolved itself into a broken, many fissured, irregular shaft soaring three hundred feet above the flat top of the mesa, a colossal monument to the moods of the fierce land from which it sprang, broad based, tapering and bulging, crowned at the top by a flat slab of stone. What a view from up there!

He climbed up some fifty feet without difficulty, following a natural way that was like a man-made trail outworn and broken down by the ages; perhaps, long, long ago, man had lent a helping hand? The second fifty or sixty feet were harder, slower going, but brought him to a comfortable resting place. On one side was the diminished shaft, rising still higher, on the other side the steep wall of rock up which he had climbed, while between them extended a wide, flat area scattered with

fallen stone and finely weathered stone grit whereon grew scant grass. And here Hawk paused; a man might go higher still, perhaps to the top, yet that would be with considerable difficulty and hazard. This was high enough for his present purpose. From here, looking forth across many undulatory miles, he could see the Blue Smokes, rising abruptly from the desert, already revealed in that curious detail which in this atmosphere at early morning and late afternoon caused distant mountains to look as though near at hand, every cliff and scar, every cañon and barren peak standing forth clear and definite.

He saw more than the Blue Smokes. Small, straggling figures passing over a dreary waste of sand, looking no larger than jack-rabbits, were Blondino's following.

"Dan'l is going to have company late this morning," he mused. "I'd like to be there to lend him a hand, but then a man can't have everything. If Dan'l is all alone—Well, no doubt he has managed to make out a good long while and can handle himself under difficulties, as most desert rats can."

He turned away, though reluctantly, set his rifle against the rocks, found a grassy spot which would be for hours in the shade of the rocks towering above, and stretched out for a long-deferred sleep. From afar a high-pitched voice, though raised in imprecation as old Sam communed with a certain black mule, reached him like thin buglings from Elfinland. These were the last sounds he heard, dozing off.

The first sounds, awaking him, were of stones rattling downwards as some one climbed up toward where he lay. He got to his feet silently and took up his rifle. The sun was some hours high, so it might be either old Sam returned or John Cobb.

It proved to be La Güera.

CHAPTER X

"WELCOME TO THE HIGH PLACES!"

THE girl was so startled that she came dangerously near losing her grasp on the cliff edge and falling. No whit less surprised was the man who saw her appear here when he had had no inkling that she had ever left Nacional. For a moment they were silent and motionless, eyeing each other curiously. Hawk spoke first.

"Welcome to the high places," he said coolly.

She stood hesitantly where she was, balanced somewhat insecurely, gripping the rock with both hands. Balanced, too, was the spirit within her, undecided whether to climb up to the level, grassy shoulder of the cliff or to descend hastily.

"I'll not molest you," said Hawk, and stepped back. "I'll even go down and leave you in solitary possession of this exalted region. It is high time for me to be on my way; thanks for waking me."

Her indecision was brief. She climbed up to a level with him.

"I did not know that you were here—or anywhere near," she said lamely.

"Of course not. Nor did I know or even guess. You were old John Cobb's 'passenger' last night!"

She stood a few steps away from the path which had led her here, obviously allowing him ample room to pass. And when he remained where he was, looking at her thoughtfully, she said crisply:

"I thought you were going down."

She looked pale and very weary. She was dressed as he had seen her last night, even to the ridiculous high heels; only her jeweled ornaments were lacking. Clearly, then, her departure from the Hidden Hacienda had partaken of a haste like that of his own. Such haste, in her, spelled headlong flight.

"You can spare me a moment," he said evenly.

There had been fear at first in her eyes. Now there was only aversion.

"No. There is nothing I need hear from you, or you from me."

"There may be—"

"After last night?" she cried hotly. "After—"

"Well? After what?"

She answered deliberately.

"After you shot—Pedro Perrigo."

"I note that you do not say after I shot—your father!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"And I note, further, how you do not say after I *killed* him!"

She bit her lip and her hands clenched convulsively.

"And what do you mean by that?"

"That I did not kill Perrigo. That, when I could have done so without the least trouble, I did not."

"Yet I saw you! Why do you try to deny it?"

"Merely because for some reason which baffles me, perhaps for no reason at all, I do not care to be mistaken for a murderer."

All she said was: "Will you let me pass on? I am in a hurry."

That mystified him.

"In a hurry? To go where? Have you a tryst with the invisible people of the upper sky?"

"I want to climb higher. I—"

She had meant to say something further, but halted abruptly.

"You want to find if Blondino is still in sight? You'd be disappointed; he'll be in the foothills, already drawing close to the Blue Smokes."

She seemed all the more eager to go on. What on earth, or above earth, for that matter, could she be wanting any higher up the towering rocks? The steepening way must grow more hazardous at every step from now on, and the girl did not have the look of one used to this sort of work. Well, that was her affair, and she seemed anxiously set upon it. He took up his hat and went down over the edge with never a backward look.

But at the base of the Sentinel he stopped. Whatever her errand she would probably not be overlong about it, and he found himself grimly set upon a few words more with her.

He waited patiently, wondering how much she knew of matters which he himself glimpsed none too clearly. He had learned something from that Chavez, nicknamed the Squirrel, who had died of knife wounds in Acapulco; he had gleaned something, if not much, at the Hacienda Escondida. To the entire broken pattern the old priest of Nacional had added some few tangled threads of his recital of the Castañares tragedy.

He looked upward; La Güera was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she had worked around to the other side of the rocks. He wondered how high she meant to climb—and why? And in a few minutes later he had his answer to the two questions. She meant to go to the very top, and had actually arrived there. He did not see her, but he did see a great black column of smoke standing straight aloft in the still air. Surely La Güera had made the long, steep climb to light a signal fire. Ponder the

matter all he would, that rémained the explanation. An explanation which, like many others, started up still further questions.

When she came down again she was paler than before and trembling. He studied her critically. She had encountered both hard going and danger up there, going about her task, yet she had done what she had set out to do. Right now she was on the ragged edge of collapse, yet the spirit within her carried on.

"You promised—not to molest me," she said breathlessly.

"You're riding your nerves to a fall," he told her bluntly. "No rest or sleep last night—anything to eat?" he ended sharply.

"Eat!" she cried, and started to laugh. Only in time did she catch herself, escaping a burst of hysteria. She clapped both hands to her face, shaken bodily by a visible tremor. How many hours since she had eaten or slept? Hours in which so much had happened—since Pedro Perrigo flourished a knife in the moonlight and went down under a bullet.

"Look here," said Hawk, impersonal to the extent of sternness. "You're ready to fly to bits. No, I'll not bother you. But I'm going to see you down to the cabin, put you under the care of the old men, and—"

"No, no! Let me go alone."

"I'll do nothing of the sort until I hand you over to Cobb and old Sam. Then—"

"I'll not go with you! I'll not take a step until you leave me."

"Oh, all right," said Hawk, and shrugged and turned away. "But sometime, later on, I'm going to have a word or two with you."

He returned to the cottonwoods in the flat below,

saddled his horse and rode through the trees, back to the log cabin. It seemed strangely quiet here. The door was closed; neither the querulous tones of old Sam nor the mellow boom of John Cobb's voice disturbed the deep silence. The buckboard was nowhere in evidence, no black mule nor white mare to be seen.

The explanation was not long dawning on Julian Hawk. The two old men had sent the girl up old Sentinel to make the signal smoke, no doubt having kept some sort of smoke-emitting fuel up there for the purpose, and they themselves had hurried away. Where? Where, indeed, except to the Blue Smokes where their other partner, Dan'l, awaited them! And for whose eyes, if not that same Dan'l's, was the smoke signal meant? Between twenty and thirty miles between the Sentinel of the Desert and the Blue Smokes, yet these were miles of the clearest air in the world. Hawk glanced upward again; a huge, black column stood straight up into the sky and, he knew, might be discerned readily far across the desert.

That he had not seen the men departing was readily enough explained. Down here in the bed of the ravine they would have been hidden by the cliff walls and by the cottonwoods; they would follow the ravine for upwards of a mile and a half. On quitting it, they would still be hidden from view by the little hills for another mile or so. Doubtless, if he cared to return to the lookout point, he'd now see the buckboard with two old men in it, making what little haste they could.

"They've left her alone here and gone about their business," thought Hawk. "Well, why not? She ought to be able to take care of herself."

With that he meant to ride away, being about his own business. Yet the picture of her as he had just left her persisted in his mind, and it seemed a callously

brutal sort of thing to do, to leave her in all this desolation to fend for herself. What did she know first hand of the desert which extended in all directions about this aloof place? There had been at times flashes of absolute desperation in her eyes. He had known, before now, people who knew little of the desert and had pitted themselves against it—and whom the desert had wiped out of existence. She had been hidden last night, when he came up with Cobb's stranded buckboard; she had hidden from Blondino and his men, from Hawk; filled with fears, she was hiding from the world. What if Blondino returned this way?

"She'd strike out into the desert quite as likely as not," grunted Hawk. Dismounting, he tied his horse to a tree and waited.

She came at last, walking dispiritedly, her head down. She did not see him until she stood quite close, under the big cottonwood where he waited. She started back, and the faintest hint of color streamed into her white cheeks.

"You—"

"Look here, Miss La Güera," he said simply, maintaining, as always, his impersonal attitude, "there's no sense looking at me, dodging me, as if I were a leper—"

"You are! A moral leper—"

"I'm nothing of the sort; that's all tommy-rot. I'm just an ordinary, everyday man, I guess, a man who—"

"You are El Gabilan. You are the Red Captain—"

"What of it? I was born red-headed," and he smiled, meaning through casual lightness of spirit to win her away, if only a step, from her deadly serious mood.

"But not red-handed!"

"It is the death of Perrigo that makes you shudder at the sight of me? We're not in for any lengthy dis-

cussion of the affair, but here are two points to hold in mind: If I hadn't shot when I did, Perrigo would have knifed poor old Castañares. Second, Perrigo did not die from my bullet, and would never have died from it. Blondino killed him."

"Oh! If that were only true— But, no, you are lying to me!"

"I am doing nothing of the sort," he returned stiffly, a flush in his own richly tanned face. "I may have broken a few bones in my time, and perhaps a law or two, but I am not a liar."

She mocked him, become bitter and scornful, crying out:

"Oho! One may be a bandit captain, a robber and all that, and yet hold himself high above any suspicion of telling untruths!" And for the second time he thought that she was about to burst into uncontrollable, hysterical laughter.

"I have told you the truth, at any rate," he said gravely. "What is more, I think that in your heart you know it. So much for that. Next, the two old men are gone. You knew?"

He read in her eyes that she did know; further, that she had not wanted him to know. Despite an attempt at high courage now, she shrank back against the trunk of the old cottonwood.

"Oh, I'm going fast enough, don't fear," he assured her. "First, I'm going into the cabin with you and see what they've left you in the shape of provisions. They'll be all day getting to the Blue Smokes; the Lord only knows how long they'll be held up there; there's another day getting back. You'll be alone here all that while?"

"What of it? I'm not afraid. And no one will know— Unless you tell!"

"I'll tell no one. In fact, I'm going to forget all about it myself just as soon as I can. But I can't very well ride off and leave you to starve to death here; it would be just like those old coots to skip out and never think to leave you so much as a loaf of bread. Even a red-handed highwayman," he concluded, close to a sneer as she stared so suspiciously at him, "would do what I am doing."

She was afraid of him, afraid to go with him into the lonely cabin, yet more afraid, when he looked at her like that, to refuse. So in the end she led the way and he followed.

"How you're going to make out here, even for a few days, I'm blessed if I know," he admitted ruefully as he looked around the two-roomed, untidy place with its uninviting bunks, ragged quilts, and general air of most thoroughly uninviting disorder. "Those blankets—"

She shuddered.

"I wouldn't touch one of them for the world!"

"Don't know that I blame you! How on earth did you happen to come out this way?"

"Where on earth could I go?" she cried out piteously, and it was tears now, not laughter, which he feared.

"You were just on your way—anywhere? And chanced to fall in with John Cobb, an honest-looking old pilgrim? And so followed anywhere that he led?"

She nodded.

"I felt that I had to run somewhere! I took the first horse I came to in the stable. I found out later that it was Victor Blondino's horse. I knew that he would hunt me down, following the horse. So when I overtook the old man, I turned the horse loose and came with him."

Hawk was rummaging in a crazy sort of cupboard made of boxes nailed against the wall.

"Well, there's enough to keep you from starving," he conceded. "Coffee and sugar, dried apples, some bacon and flour—which, by-the-by, is the blackest flour I ever saw!—salt, and that's about all. No! Here are a couple of cans! Half a dozen! Bully."

He put on water for coffee, cut some thin slices of bacon and mixed a batch of flapjacks. She had dropped down on a box for a chair, and was watching him in a strange, puzzled way.

"Come ahead, now," he invited when his coffee boiled. "You're going to have breakfast."

"Did you really mean last night to kill Blondino?" she asked abruptly.

"I am afraid that I did." He made a wry face. "With reasons enough, too. Do you know that little wild sermon you preached me outside in the moonlight may have had something to do with my change of mind?" he exclaimed, as though the thought only now suggested itself to him, looking at her with new interest. "Anyway, it did come over me that there are other ways of getting a man than mowing him down with bullets. Certain restitution a live man can make; kill him and he can make none. No, I'm not through with this Blondino, yet if I should ever happen to kill him you may rest assured it will be only because he forces me to it. And now, breakfast!"

"I'm not hungry—"

"You're only starved, that's all." He sat down on another box. "I'll not budge until you eat."

So she drew up to the little wabbly table and began sipping the black coffee he had set forth for her. It

was strong and good, and it warmed her and put fresh heart into her, and a little color into her pinched cheeks. He made his cigarette and appeared concerned only with the world as he could see it through the wide open door. She began eating, and stole many a quick, furtive look at him. Somehow he did not look the beast she had meant to think him. And there was *some* truth in what he had said about firing that shot last night; she recalled vividly the glint of the moon on the long blade in Perrigo's nervous hands, whipped up above Inocente Castañares head—

"I'm on my way now," said Hawk, and stood up. "Just this to say and for you to remember: Not all the tales told of Captain Colorado are true tales, and I am not the sort of man that Blondino is. After I'm gone, you'll think that over and you'll know it's true. Why do I inflict word of myself on you? Because of what comes next: You made a signal smoke up on the Sentinel of the Desert just now, having promised Cobb or old Sam that you'd do it. It was meant for old Dan'l a good many miles away in the Blue Smokes. In a few hours I'll be there, too, in the Blue Smokes. You can make a second signal smoke or fire. If you should need a friend— Why, light her up, and I'll come to you."

He went out to his horse and rode away. She jumped up and ran to the door, hidden herself, yet watching him as he rode out of sight. He did not once turn in the saddle, and she did not know whether she was glad of that or sorry.

CHAPTER XI

THE SILENT GLADE

The Blue Smokes constituted a gigantic flinty-spired, chasm-rifted oasis rising abruptly, falling away abruptly in a great level expanse of sand and cactus; a lofty-cliffed island in a sea of sand, gouged into narrow gorges, upheaved into tumbled areas of bowlders, the whole comparable to an eroded mesa magnified a thousandfold. Embracing altogether not over forty square miles, it was a region of considerable diversification. There were slopes plentifully studded with piñon-trees, and other slopes bleak and barren; there were craggy peaks that stabbed upward at the sky, and grassy dimples where water was and a million little flowers; a sprinkling of tall cottonwoods grew in some of the ravines and in one tiny valley there was a noble growth of ancient sycamores hugging the watercourse.

Julian Hawk, turning slightly northward as he drew near the mountains, rode into the Blue Smokes from the north-west. Long ago, far out in the midst of the sandy wastes, he had overtaken the two old men in the buck-board, making what haste they could to come to the aid of their other partner, "Dan'l." And be sure that never again was John Cobb to be caught napping, be it by a solitary horseman or such forces as had ridden with Blondino. Seeing a rider overhauling them, John Cobb, who was driving, promptly sat on his reins and held his rifle in both hard old hands. Old Sam, likewise, was on guard to-day; his shot-gun was again loaded gen-

erously with buckshot and in his roving eyes was a light of battle. Seeing who it was they were somewhat reassured, yet not so lulled to sleep were all their suspicions that either put his weapon aside.

There had been a brief parley. At first the two partners were inclined to keep to themselves all that they knew, yet, in the end, what with their knowledge that Blondino was already there and their logical belief, based on Cobb's experience with the bandit, that it was he above all others whom they might look to for trouble, they told Hawk all that they knew of Dan'l's whereabouts. He was to be looked for in the lower slopes of the mountains as one approached from the north-west. And, since Hawk was impatient to ride on and refused to loiter in order to avail himself of such reinforcements as they represented, let him tell Dan'l that they were coming. And let him warn Dan'l, the old fool, not to spill any more beans than he'd spilled already. And tell Dan'l—

Hawk had left them shouting together after him, and so came at last alone to the talus of the Blue Smokes. If Dan'l was to be found here, it was a hundred times more than merely likely that here one might expect to find Blondino also. Like the two old men he had left behind him, Hawk now rode with his rifle in his hand. It was entirely reasonable to suspect that Blondino would be looking for him, and that, the moment Hawk was close enough to the mountains to be recognized, Blondino might try what could be done with a rifle shot.

With all this in mind Hawk rode slowly until he estimated that he was within rifle shot of a number of likely lurking places in the rough lands ahead, then touched his horse with his spurs and hurried into the wide mouth of the cañon which gave entrance into a

wild region of cliff and gorge and craggy peak. At a swinging gallop, with turfy sod underfoot, he passed between precipices on right and left that were like a gigantic gateway, and found himself almost immediately in a fairly level, shadily pleasant glade, locked in by steep sides of the mountain. There were pines on the slope beyond, and a line of vividly green willows marked the way a thin creek ran. As likely a place, he thought, as Dan'l or another who had business here might hope to find for a camp site.

But the glade proved to be untenanted now save by himself and the shy little wild folk who peered at him curiously from a distance, a quick black-eyed squirrel high up in a pine, a red-headed woodpecker peeking out from behind a dead limb. Men had been here recently, Blondino's men, no doubt; there were the fresh signs where several horses had trampled. But the place was deserted now, and lay very quiet and peaceful in the warm sunshine.

It was a silence and peace which Hawk failed to find reassuring. Perhaps only the eyes of the wild things watched him, yet he had the familiar sense of other eyes upon him. He cast swift, searching glances up the flanks of the mountains; there were scores of places up there where a man or many men might lie snugly hidden, watchful of what went on below.

He rode into a willow thicket and dismounted. Here was a good spot to leave his horse, at least half-hidden. And from behind the leafy screen he again investigated the mountain-sides. A hawk swept into view, spiralled lazily a few times, drifted away. He heard a quail calling from some distant copse.

"If those old boys were right," mused Hawk, "if Dan'l was prospecting in this general neighborhood, right here

is where he would have made his camp. It's the logical place, easy to get to, water handy, wood for his fire. And there's just as much sign of a camp here as there is of a railroad station. Ergo—either the old boys didn't know what they were talking about, or didn't care to trust me with the truth."

He had been questing up and down, back and forth, for an hour without glimpsing so much as an empty tomato can or an onion peel, things that not even the little wild rodents would carry away; nowhere could he come upon a blackened ring of a camp fire. True, Dan'l might have made his headquarters higher up on the slopes, in some more unlikely place; but why? Hawk had worked upward along the line of willows into the narrowing ravine, never having heard of any old prospector who liked to carry his water any great distance in preference to doing his cooking where a stream flowed, and had come upon not the slightest hint of a camp.

Well, Blondino had ridden here first, had looked about and had gone on, seeking elsewhere. No Dan'l hereabouts. The old boys hadn't known, or, a great deal more likely, hadn't minded lying about it. Small blame to them, perhaps; they knew the way of the world when a vein of gold was uncovered. Men swooped down upon the prey from all quarters—like buzzards; of a mind to rend and tear and have their gluttonous share.

He returned to his horse by the lower creek and sat in a patch of shade to smoke and plan for himself. Abstractedly he watched the thin, blue, gently wavering column of smoke mount up from his cigarette; from it his thoughts idly trailed away to another column of smoke, lofty and black against the clear blue of the sky as it towered from the Sentinel of the Desert. Had Dan'l seen the signal? What could he have made of it? The

very promptness with which it had been created spelled preparation; no ordinary brush fire would have shot forth such inky volumes of smoke as that. Yet could the partners conceivably have had such an elaborate code of signals as to make it possible to convey any considerable number of messages? And could they have foreseen the need of sending such a warning as they had certainly desired to flash to-day across the desert miles?

"Not likely," thought Hawk. "And I wonder if Dan'l even lifted his eyes from his diggings long enough to see a smudge across the sky? And, among other things, it's questionable if the smoke was started before Blondino got here. Right now Blondino may know where Dan'l is— And until the end of time it may remain Blondino's secret!"

Though he spent some hours searching through the nearby cañons, he still came upon no sign of Dan'l, no sight or sound of any other man. Yet at times the sense that he was being spied upon returned to him. He could only shrug it away. If by chance Blondino or one of Blondino's men did hide and watch him, what of it now? That he had not drawn a rifle shot all this while must mean that the danger of that sort of thing had passed by him. And, after all, a sense like that was not greatly to be relied on.

In the end he returned to the pleasant, cliff-bound glade, and waited for the coming of John Cobb and old Sam. In due course, behind a jaded, dusty team, the two old men arrived, both alert and eager and showing an exceedingly lively interest in the weapons which they did not lay aside for an instant.

"That man Blondy here?" were John Cobb's words of greeting.

"No," returned Hawk. "Neither is your pardner, Dan'l."

The two old men regarded each other thoughtfully.

"This is where he ought to be," said Cobb. "Unless—"

Old Sam put back his head just then, opened his mouth at one corner only, and emitted a long-drawn-out, ear-splitting yell. A second unearthly howl he patted into an eerie series of bubbles of sound with his talon of a hand, achieving a result peculiarly blood-curdling.

"Dan'l, the old fool, 'll krow that if he's in earshot," he affirmed.

"He'd hear it if he's anywhere on top of earth," grunted John Cobb. "Why 'n't you give a man fair warning you meant to squeal like that? You pret' near busted both eardrums for me."

"Le's go unhook the ponies and make camp," said old Sam. "Likely enough Dan'l, the old fool, 'll be traipsing in any time now."

But no Dan'l put in an appearance. The two old men looked at each other frequently now, their eyes troubled. When old Sam sent out his war-whoop a second time there was no remonstrance from Cobb. They turned their heads sidewise, as men always will when straining the auditory nerve against the faintest far-off sound. And both jumped together when there came an answer. Together, however, and immediately they sighed and shook their heads.

"Not Dan'l, that," they agreed.

A man rode into sight over a shoulder of the mountain; John Cobb cocked his rifle, and old Sam cuddled his shot-gun. They looked to Hawk questioningly. After a moment he shook his head.

"No, not Blondino. Don't know who— There's another fellow—"

"*And* some," observed old Sam. "Not your little playmate, Blondino's party?"

"I don't think so." Certainly none of the men was Blondino himself.

The newcomers caught sight of the three men in the hollow, waved, and came on. Man after man appeared until there were upward of a dozen of them. Some carried picks, some shovels, a few rifles; picks, shovels, and guns seemed the essential part of their impedimenta. As they drew nearer Cobb fell to squinting from under the eye-shade of his hand, giving close and particular attention to the foremost of the riders, then sank an excited thumb deep in the middle of his partner's bony anatomy, declaring:

"Sam, m' boy! Look who's here! Leading the pack in full cry, so to speak!"

Old Sam was peering intently. He accepted the thumb thrust in silence save for an involuntary grunt.

"Holy mackerel!" he muttered, having seen. "It's Tom March. Ain't it, Jawnny?"

"Who's March?" asked Hawk. "Not—"

"Exac'ly. Him. Big Moments March, they call him." Old Sam then fell to cackling dryly. "Which means Dan'l, the old fool, really did find gold this trip—huh, Jawn?"

Even Hawk understood now. It was said of Tom March, "Big Moments March," that he could smell the yellow ore; that he could come straight at it through a thirty-foot-thick barrier of solid rock; that if a man unearthed it and Tom March was within a day's ride, he'd show up within that same identical period of twenty-four hours. He was reputed a millionaire several times over, and every penny of his wealth had come to him direct from the earth's big treasure vaults.

"March is the man on the big bay—in front?" asked Hawk.

"He's it," nodded Cobb, bringing the butt of his rifle to rest on his worn boot. "The big square guy."

There was a square look to him. A large-framed man, not over forty or forty-five, dressed in conventional town garb save for the rough high boots, with a short-cropped black mustache trimmed off square, with a square jaw and massive square shoulders. And, to complete it all, with what one comprehends as a "square" look in a pair of wide-spaced, keen, dark eyes.

"I'd rather see Big Moments March here than some I could mention," conceded Cobb. And old Sam nodded.

"Howdy?" said March pleasantly. He sat sideways in the saddle, a leg loosely thrown over the horn. "Hello, Johnny; hello, Sam."

"Howdy?" returned Sam and Cobb as one.

"I hear you boys have started something," laughed March. "Which one of you? Both?"

"Dan'l, the old fool—"

Again March laughed.

"And where's Dan'l?" he asked. "Bring him back with you?"

Old Sam spoke up quickly.

"It's like this—"

His partner squelched him, extinguished him after a brief exchange of words and glances, like a candle.

"I'll tell what's to be told, Sam."

"Will you?" jeered old Sam. "If you ask me—"

"I'm not asking you; I'm telling you. I'll spin this yarn, and you'll keep your trap shut."

"Will I?" sputtered old Sam.

"Unless," said Cobb heavily, "unless, Sam, m' son, you should wish that a certain something we both know

about should be made public at this very identical moment, you'll shut up like a pocket-knife that's due to be pocketed."

And it was then that old Sam, though he mouthed and mumbled and glared, allowed himself to be extinguished. As for Cobb, after one gleam of malicious triumph, he took a deep breath—and expounded.

"Here, what's all this?" demanded a somewhat puzzled March. "One thing at the time, Johnny. You rattle a fellow."

For a great deal that had been seething within John Cobb for some hours had burst out now like an explosion. Denunciation of a scallywag name of Blondino led all the rest; a thieving, robbing, dirty devil who'd set a man on foot in the middle of the desert and then rush off to murder that man's best friend and pardner; a low-life that was due to have his skunk's head blown clean off his rattlesnake's body the first sight had of him.

"Who's Blondino?" demanded March, while the men gathered about listened intently, a smile here and there fading swiftly. "And what do you mean; that he has killed old Dan'l?"

A lanky, leather-faced man who had a pick tied at his saddle strings, a small roll behind, and a rifle across the saddle in front of him, spoke up to remark drawlingly:

"There's a Mex. gent name of Blondino that cuts throats south of Nacional somewhere. Never heard of him showin' this side the line, though."

"He's the coot!" vociferated Cobb angrily. "He set me afoot out in the sand before I could get home last night. Had a pack of cut-throats with him. They drilled on here. Did for old Dan'l, more'n likely—"

Again March, who, it appeared at the jump, had a way

of commanding in such an impromptu gathering as this, headed him off and turned him back in his recital.

"How long have you known Blondino? And just what do you know of him, Johnny?"

"Don't know him. Don't want to. Never laid eyes on him until last night—and then he had a rag over his face, the low-life!"

"And he told you who he was? Or you just guessed?"

"This man told me," said Cobb, beginning to look flustered under March's treatment.

The eyes of every man turned interestedly upon Hawk.

"Who's he?" asked March bluntly.

Cobb started to answer before it dawned upon him that he did not know, whereupon he simply looked blank, standing there with his mouth open. Old Sam alone of them all tittered. Hawk spoke for himself, saying briefly:

"My name's Hawk."

"What's this about Blondino?"

"I found Cobb stranded in the desert, sitting in a buckboard with no horses in sight. He told me that several men had swooped down on him and had driven off his live stock. I knew that Blondino was riding ahead of me with some of his rag-tag and bob-tail, and it was open and shut that it was the same Blondino who had molested Cobb."

"That's all you know about it? Didn't see the thing happen?"

"That's all I know."

March turned a pair of puzzled, frowning eyes on Cobb.

"You're all het up, ain't you, Johnny?" he remarked meditatively. "You and old Sam there, both loaded to the guards, are hair-trigger to start shooting the minute

Blondino shows his face? And, since a rag was over the face when it came your way before, and since, further, you wouldn't be the man to take any chances on letting a man off easy that had served you a trick like that, why, you're all primed and cocked to blow 'most any stranger's head off for him!"

"It ain't only having my horses stolen," snapped Cobb. "It's worse than that. *Where's Dan'l?*"

More thoughtful than ever grew March.

"Think Blondino murdered him, do you? Just *think* it, without a cussed bit of reason; just feel it in your bones, because you want to?"

"Where's Dan'l?" demanded Cobb stubbornly.

Now, March had known these old desert rats aforetime; aye, and he had known others like them. He sat gnawing at his short mustache, staring in puzzled fashion at the two old men, now and then his eyes with a hint of suspicion in them stabbing away at Hawk. Hawk met his look steadily, and all the others saw how these two strove to gauge each other.

"Boys," Big Moments March spoke up at last, his voice meant for all who heard it, "this is a free country as far as I know, and every man's got a right to do pretty much as he darn' well pleases. But I'm going to tell you something: Already, at a guess, there are a couple of dozen men scattered around through the Blue Smokes who weren't here yesterday. And by to-morrow there'll be twice as many—ten times as many, maybe. There'll be a good many we know, men like you fellows, old prospectors, and more than a fair sprinkling of cowboys, pretty decent specimens, take 'em as they stack up. There'll be more, I expect, that we don't know—and you know what sort they're likely to be as well as I do. Now, we all know Johnny Cobb and we all know

Sam and Dan'l, and they're simply ace-high good scouts. But already these two are all stepped up, ready to burn gunpowder in a hurry and let questions drag along next. Start that way—and where do we get?"

"Where's Dan'l?" reiterated Cobb, pounding the ground with his rifle butt. 'Is a man like that Blondino to—"

But they cried him down.

"We'll look for Dan'l. Maybe he's gone somewhere, off to the other side of the mountains; anywhere. Just because he isn't here right now is no sign he's dead. And there's not the least scrap of reason to have him dead and buried this way and Blondino or any other man judged guilty when so far nothing's known! You got sense enough to see that, John," he broke off impatiently.

The lanky cowboy with the drawling voice, a man plainly as quick of perception as he was slow of utterance, observed quietly.

"There comes somebody now. Coming up over the ridge. Six or seven men."

"That's Blondino," said Hawk. "The man in the lead, on the black horse."

"Not exactly a friend of yours, eh?" said March.

"No."

"You, too, suspect him of having done for old Dan'l?"

"I wouldn't put it beyond him."

"Ah!" said March. Suddenly he straightened in the saddle and swung about to search the faces of the men close at hand. "It's going to take mighty little to start things humming hereabouts. Stir up a lot of dynamite, black powder, and live coals, and it would be nothing but a gentle pop compared to the ruction that's got all the makings right at hand. What we need the worst way

in the world until a bit of the fever heat runs down is a sort of impromptu sheriff and a cool-headed committee to back him up. And I don't mean to-morrow—nor yet ten minutes from now!"

Big Moments March glimpsed one of his Big Moments and carved his initials deep in it. His words fell crisp and clear and emphatic, constituting a command. It was the lanky cowboy who spoke up.

"That'll be you, Mr. March. We'll back you up."

Other men, watching Blondino and his followers coming on, yet not failing to see the looks on the faces of the two old men and a look of another sort in Hawk's eyes, were quick to line up on the side of law and order as they saw it, and spoke their minds together and definitely.

"All right," said March. "Bud"—to the lanky man—"you're chief deputy. Keep an eye on these old fire-eaters and on our new friend. Make 'em think they're old ladies at a tea-party."

He dipped his spurs at that and galloped to a meeting with Blondino's party.

CHAPTER XII

"WHERE'S DAN'L?"

"You're Blondino?" asked March.

The men whom he had ridden to intercept closed around him in an interested ring, their horses to the last one droop-headed from utter weariness and willing enough to stand still. March's eyes, having swept across the several faces, finding not one familiar among them, had begun and stopped with the man whom he addressed.

Blondino began with a smile and ended with good-humored laughter.

"Sorry if I have to disappoint you, *compañero*," he said easily, "but I'm not Blondino."

Tom March's eyes narrowed; it seemed to him that a faintly mocking smile passed across the ring of faces like the mere suspicion of a glint of winter sunshine. Blondino laughed again, showing both upper and lower teeth, strong and white, and added lightly:

"It does happen, *amigo*, that there's a pretty noticeable similarity in names. Mine's Blond*ine*; pronounced Blond*een*." He showed the strong white teeth more than ever in the emphasized enunciation. "And I believe there is a Mexican cut-throat south the line who's fair-skinned for a Mex. and has happened to get himself nicknamed Blondino. Not related, thanks."

If he lied, thought March, he lied remarkably well. Yet it was nothing novel to meet up with a liar who was a master of his own trade.

"The reason I put the question," he said, "is that one of the men back there said that you were Blondino."

"Then he's a fool or a liar," said Blondino, as blunt as a man could be, yet seeming unruffled. "I'm pretty well known not too far from here, other side Bashford way; Jake Blondine, owner of the Long Valley ranch. These men here know me; some of 'em take my pay at Long Valley. And, by the way, long as we're indulging in a sport that's a new one to me in a free, wide, and open country, who the hell are you?"

"March—Tom March."

Blondino lifted his flaxen brows.

"Big Moments, huh? The mining man? Well, then, I guess the tale is true, and there's been a real streak of color uncovered here. Now, let's have this: Just which gent was it that I'm to ride over to and ask him which he is, fool or liar?"

"He says his name is Hawk—"

Blondino affected to look keenly at the knot of men, mounted and on foot, down in the little glade. And then he achieved a visible start.

"The long jasper draped over his rifle? *Hawk?*" He began laughing again. "Know who he is, March?"

"I know only the name he gave me."

"He's known by more than one name. Ever hear of Captain Colorado? El Gabilan, as they translate him way down in Mexico?" He slapped his thigh resoundingly. "Here's a good one! Disappointed just now, were you, to learn that I wasn't a perfectly good Mex. brigand? And all the while had El Gabilan in your party!"

March looked mystified, and Blondino grinned delightedly.

"How does it happen that you and Hawk—or Captain

Colorado or whoever he is—know each other?" asked March suddenly.

"Look here, brother," said Blondino, still good natured, but with a first cold gleam in his eyes, "I have a little habit of 'tending to my own business and asking other gents to do the same. Ever hear of the custom?"

"A good custom. I subscribe to it ordinarily." He knew that he was dealing now with a free spirit; a leader of men himself, he understood that here was another who led and had no stomach for following. And he had asked rather more questions than it was the custom hereabouts for one stranger to broadside another with.

"Then there's something out of the ordinary happened?" quizzed Blondino. "Something besides a gold strike?"

"Yes."

Blondino pushed his hat far back and ran his big fingers through a confusion of blond ringlets, appearing to reflect.

"Tell you," he exclaimed; "I know who and what you are, Tom March, and I'll take it for granted that you've some reason in appearing to butt in on another man's affairs. Shoot the works; I'll speak up and answer anything on earth."

"That's fair enough," returned March. "Fine! First off, there are two old firebrands back there, partners to another who is said to have found gold. The third—Dan'l they call him—seems to have sprouted wings. Holding you to be Blondino, his partners think you've murdered him. And they're all ready to start shooting."

Blondino frowned.

"Idiots!" he snorted.

"What's more," went on March, "one of the old men

claims that some one with a crowd about like yours overtook him in the desert last night and stole his horses, leaving him on foot."

Blondino's frown deepened.

"Looks to me," he snapped, his blue eyes glinting, "like your crowd was trying to put up some little game meant to persuade me to call my boys off and go home —leaving all the pickings here, whatever they may turn out to be, entirely in your hands!"

"That's not the case. I simply rode over here to head you off in order to keep the fireworks from exploding all in one shot." March shrugged and his own eyes brightened angrily. "I've a notion to back off out of range and let a couple of packs of fools exterminate each other."

Blondino surprised him by laughing again as though he saw only rich humor in the suggestion.

"I'll answer a question you asked a while back," he said as his laughter subsided, "about myself and Mr. Red Hawk back yonder. I met up with him last night for the first time in my life. Down in Nacional. We got into a game, just the two of us. He did some sleight of hand stuff with the lights, did the rest of his little act in the pitch dark, and made as nice a getaway as ever you saw, along with a pile of money that even a rich man like you would think twice about throwing away."

"Well," said March solemnly, "the devil himself seems to be mixing in this little party. If you and Hawk have made up your minds to travel way out here to settle a quarrel, and if Johnny Cobb and old Sam want to take it on themselves to shoot it out with you, I guess you'll all have to have your own sweet and merry ways. There's no sense in it, of course. If you, for one, would only pull off a bit and make your own camp, I could under-

take to hold the homicidal mania in check. But I don't suppose—"

"Suits me," said Blondino coolly, "but for one thing. When the *hombre* you call Dan'l shows up, I'd just as leave be around. If he's got his pick into real gold, there'll be men staking out claims in a hurry. I had sort of figured being a stake-driver along with the rest. Right along with the first of 'em, too."

March sighed in relief. It could be arranged, then. Blondino would withdraw into the neighboring cañon. March would pledge his word to play square; Blondino seemed pretty well satisfied with the promise. Yet it could do no harm for one of Blondino's party to join March's men. He was to be left free to return to Blondino at any moment with any word he cared to bring.

"Fair enough," said March. "Which man?"

"Step up, Kid," called Blondino, and a young fellow forced his horse forward.

"Kid French" he was called, and at first March was perplexed to find Blondino deputizing on such an errand one who looked to be a mere boy in his teens. He was slight and slender and very dark; full, black, dreamy eyes and an oval face suggested a girl masquerading. Only his mouth was ugly and cruel, the lips set in a perpetual sneer. And when March looked again and more penetratingly he saw that there was a light coming and going in the dark dreaminess of the eyes which spoke of a spirit that was alert and, he judged, downright evil. There were men about him twice this boy's age in years; never a man of them would ever come to his full stature for daring viciousness. Here rode another free spirit, free absolutely of all restraints of human sentiment. He spoke up in a soft and pleasant voice, and simply to indicate his willingness to accompany

March he employed enough obscenity of the vilest brand to sprinkle generously over an entire bar-room brawl.

"Come ahead, boys," commanded Blondino cheerily. "Anything for law and order!"

He whirled his horse and rode back whence he had come, closely followed by his men, whose faces showed varying degrees of astonishment mixed with incredulity. Kid French alone hung back and alone showed no hint of surprise or mystification. He fixed an impudent gaze on Tom March, and rode neck and neck with March to rejoin the other men in the glade, as cocksure and pert an individual as may well be imagined. March had never a word to say to him.

Both John Cobb and old Sam looked disappointed—and hurt; they turned reproachful eyes upon the returning mining man.

"Now," said March crisply, "we're going to get somewhere in decent fashion. Bud"—to the lanky cowboy—"we pitch camp right here. Camp first, then whatever comes next. Two of my best friends are these old boys here, Johnny and old Sam. They're going to get a square deal. But for a spell we're going to see that they don't go flying around spilling buckets of blood. That man says he is not Blondino at all, but a rancher from beyond Bashford, and that his name is Jake Blondine. He says he hasn't laid eyes on Dan'l and, further, that he had nothing to do with letting Johnny down for a walk in the desert. We'll look into all these things, but for a spell we'll go slow. Suit you, boys?"

It suited them—all but John Cobb and old Sam, who muttered a bit and demanded sullenly: "Where's Dan'l?"

"We're here to find out," March assured them equably. "If any one has harmed him, we'll know. If he's been murdered, there'll be signs to cry to high heaven."

He marked Julian Hawk's taciturnity all this while, an impassive face and a still tongue.

"You came here to-day with Johnny and Sam?"

"I rode ahead," answered Hawk.

"How long ahead? How long were you here before they came?"

"Some little while. I—" Suddenly Hawk laughed. "You mean that I myself had ample time here maybe to do away with the missing Dan'l?"

Both Sam and Cobb gasped audibly at that. There was something that hadn't suggested itself to them, so occupied were they with Blondino.

"Mr. March," spoke up Bud, the cowboy, gently.

"Well?" demanded March impatiently.

"What's this bird you've brought along from the other crowd?"

But Kid French spoke up for himself, foul of mouth and forward.

"Me?" he cried out jeeringly. "I'm chief spy, if you want to know, Buddie Bell. Spy for Jake Blondine that you guys don't try to gip him out of all the boodle that there's so much chatter about!"

"You see," went on Bud Bell placidly, "I happen to know him." He still addressed Tom March; it was quite as though the Kid were some speechless specimen being calmly discussed. "He's Kid French. Came close last year to hanging for killing Charlie Murdock. Ought to have swung, too."

A sort of sulphurous glow in the Kid's dreamy eyes. Then came his cackle of derisive laughter.

"Pitch camp!" snapped Tom March. "And we stick close together, in a good snug pack, every man of us, until we begin to get things straightened out. Keep

your mouth shut, Bud! And—the same had better go for the rest of the works."

They fell gloomily silent. Out of the silence presently rose only one voice in question, to which there was no answer—the voice of John Cobb muttering, faint and sullen:

"Where's Dan'l?"

CHAPTER XIII

LAW FOR THE LAWLESS

Rapidly the mountains filled with men. Before nightfall on this first day there were some two-score adventurous spirits which had winged their ways hither. "Verily, verily," quote John Cobb, "that old fool Chancy Burns did a first-class job of bean-spilling." These gold-seekers were for the most part Americans, ranchers big and little, some prospectors, with a thin sprinkling of Mexicans. But a pretty dependable, decent crowd, taken as a whole. During the moonlit night still others came, by straggling ones and twos, sometimes several together. And all the following day the human influx continued. By mid-morning there were not less than a hundred men invading the solitudes of the Blue Smokes.

The crowd centered in what was already known as Dan'l's Glade. They brought scanty provisions and ample ammunition; through the chill nights they would have to shiver in inadequate blankets; some had no coverings of any kind and bivouacked around big fires.

As they arrived they learned of conditions here, of the vanished discoverer, of suspicion directed at a man named Blondine—or Blondino—of further suspicion resting upon a stranger who called himself Julian Hawk, and about whose red head rumors flocked, giving him unsavory reputations. The Red Hawk of Mexico, was he? Captain Colorado, of whom nearly every man of them had heard faint, far tales.

When the first fifty or sixty men had arrived they

met in caucus in the glade. They talked things over reflectively; spurts of hot-headed excitement were extinguished by some of the older, cooler men. They went on with the régime of the day before begun by Tom March. They knew Big Moments March well, personally or by wide reputation. They listened to him gravely and nodded at the end. In orderly fashion a committee of ten was named, Tom March heading the committee. It was as though, finding themselves all of a sudden become a community aloof and sufficient unto itself, they elected a sheriff. Bud Bell, standing close to March, was like a chief deputy. A middle-aged, responsible rancher named Alec Farnsworth was another. There were still others.

The word soon went about that no private quarrels were to be tolerated. If a man had a grudge against another, let him bring it up in free meeting. If he didn't like that way of doing things, let him clear out. Get out and stay out—or abide by the common vote.

If one man defied the mandate and killed his enemy, the killer was to hang. There would be no questions asked. It would matter not in the least what his grievance was. He would hang. It was to be iron law. No other condition, with so much hot blood already seething, would be tolerated.

Victor Blondino had joined them, had spoken now and then in the meeting. In a goodly proportion of strangers to the bulk of the crowd he was but one of the strangers. There were whispers about him, yet only whispers. All here had heard of a brigand called Blondino, who had never been known to operate north of the international boundary line; he was held to be "just another" of the highwaymen plying his ancient trade in old Mexico. And there were those who had heard of a

Jake Blondine, rancher, "over Bashford way." No one knew him personally. Here, among them, Blondino made a good impression. He was out-spoken, seemed frank and fearless, lifted his voice clearly in singing out his vote, a vote always for law and order.

He and Julian Hawk brushed elbows in the throng. More than once their eyes met. They did not speak, yet neither went a step out of his way to avoid the other. Men who watched them felt that when the two came together the very air about them was electrically charged. Again and again it was held inevitable that one or the other of them was going to precipitate the clash. Yet they came and went without bloodshed. Had either lost his head or coolly defied the ruling of the committee, it would have been to draw down death upon both. They bristled like wolves, yet kept the peace.

Men were free to come and go as they liked, of course. They might take themselves or their quarrels elsewhere, and no one cared where they went or what they did. But no man left the mountains, while still others arrived almost hourly. Those already here, joined immediately by the newest comers, resolved themselves into a great search-party with a dual purpose—to find Dan'l, to find Dan'l's gold, no less. They combed the broken country from rim to rim; they climbed the tallest peaks and probed into the deepest gorges; they penetrated thickets and quested among bowlders. Tireless among the others, though never hunting together, went Hawk and Blondino.

Among many uncertainties the one certain fact was held to be that the man who had vanished had not left the Blue Smokes. For he had remained here when he sent Chancy Burns out for supplies, and Chancy had

taken their entire live stock—two old horses. Neither Dan'l nor any other man was going to send off his horses and then start out to make the journey on foot across the desert. This was discussed over and over among men who from hour to hour leaned closer to the suspicions held by John Cobb and old Sam. The questions became: "Who killed Dan'l? And what was done with Dan'l's body? And had the murderer had such ample time in which to hide all traces of the rumored vein which Dan'l had uncovered that it would never again be found until he chose to disclose what he knew?"

"One thing's dead open and shut," remarked Farnsworth, "and that is that if either Hawk or Blondine, or whatever his name is, croaked the old man, he'll not dare be first to stake a claim. He'll have to wait until we all get sick and tired of this and go home; he'll have to go on waiting quite a spell after that, too. It would be too much like saying: 'I did it; come nab me!' "

"Chancy Burns 'll know something," said March, and despatched a man all the way back to Nacional to drum him up and bring him back here. "He'll know where Dan'l had his camp, and he'll come pretty close to knowing where the gold was found."

But they did not sit down to wait upon the arrival of Chancy Burns. Men who at first had straggled here and there at random and as each was led by his fancies were organized and sent out systematically. There was always the possibility that Dan'l had simply met with an accident; men still manage to shoot themselves, and there were many cliffs whence one might plunge to destruction. The old man might be lying somewhere with a broken leg.

"Tommy-rot," exploded John Cobb when such theories were aired before him. "You can't tell me. Dan'l get

himself shot? Or go falling off a cliff? Might as well say a shark came up here and got him. He's been done in. and you'll see. Done in by a low-life, name of Blondino." Inevitably he flew into a rage, mumbling. "And they won't even let me go out and shoot up the man that killed my own pardner."

In the mid-afternoon the man who had ridden away to Nacional to find Chancy Burns returned, bringing word that he had met Burns already headed this way and that he could be looked for within a couple of hours. coming along slowly with a six-horse team. Up went John Cobb's and old Sam's eyebrows as though jerked into action by some identical mechanism. Where on earth did Burns get a six-horse team? And what did he want with it?

Some one offered an explanation, and a roar of laughter went up. The suggestion made was that maybe Chancy Burns figured it out he'd need at least six horses to haul away all the gold Dan'l would have unearthed and piled up by now.

"The old fool," grunted John Cobb.

Fool or no fool, here presently came Chancy, looking serene and comfortable behind six nondescript horses. A delegation of forty eager men met him as he struck into the mountains. Chancy called a mild "Whoa!" to his team and sat regarding the crowd mildly. He was a gentle-mannered, quiet-spoken old fellow, one of the sort who looked apologetic under all circumstances (save when drunk, be it remarked parenthetically, for upon such occasions something seemed to break loose within the habitually mild soul, and Chancy named the hour his own and roared). Now, however, he was quite himself, drooping and colorless. He might have been sixty.

So many questions, all at once, were volleyed at him

that the best Chancy Burns could do was to shake his head and look borne down and dejected. John Cobb climbed up on the wagon wheel and bellowed at him:

"Where's Dan'l, you durned old hoot owl? What about Dan'l?"

"Huh?" asked Chancy weakly. "Huh? What about Dan'l?"

"That's what I'm asking you! Ain't sun-struck are you? Dan'l's gone—"

"Gone?" echoed the other, and seemed to subside into himself as though crumpled and crushed by some ponderous mystification. "Gone where?"

At that John Cobb, long ago a bundle of raw, quivering nerves, bared his teeth like a wolf. He caught Chancy Burns by the shoulder and shook him back and forth, the limp figure more than ever a picture of resignation.

"Tell me," fairly hissed John Cobb. "Where's Dan'l gone?"

"I been away," protested Chancy. "Down to Nacional. Dan'l sent me. Now you see me just getting back. I left him here—"

"Where?" asked Cobb. "There's no hide nor hair of him anywhere. Somebody's murdered him and hid the body. Where'd you leave him?"

Chancy's eyes and mouth opened up wide.

"Murdered? Dan'l? Why, he was all right when I left him, and that was only—"

Here came Tom March, shouldering to the front, speaking quietly yet hushing a rising clamor.

"Hello, Chancy," he said, and offered his hand. "Glad you've come. We've been waiting for you, the whole crowd of us. Guess we need you in the day's work, Chancy."

"Me?" said Chancy. "Need me?" He looked at

the ever-increasing crowd of men trooped down to sur round his big wagon. "All you boys—need me?"

It seemed to stupefy him. When had any one ever needed him, Chancy Burns?

"Better hop down," invited March. "We want you to help us find Dan'l. You can get us started, at any rate. You'll know right where he camped, of course?"

"Sure. Right over yonder, close by the creek. There'll be all kinds of signs; place where the fire was and everything."

Those who heard were incredulous. For the spot which Chancy Burns indicated was among the willows in the glade, so likely and logical a camp site that it was here, first of all, that the search had begun. Not so much as a match end or a charred stick had been found.

"Suppose you lead us to the exact spot?" suggested March.

Chancy climbed down with alacrity and hurried along purposefully. Coming to the creek's edge he pointed, exclaiming:

"Right here. No. Wait a minute. Right there."

A look of confusion stamped itself on his face, his voice dwindled and died away.

"This place is changed," he mumbled. "Changed in a couple of days! Willows has grown up—there ought to be an open place right here, and, instead, it's all thicket—"

"Sure you've come to the right place?" suggested some one. "Sure you haven't got the wrong cañon?"

Was a man like Chancy Burns, who had spent the most of the days of his hard old life out in the open, likely to make a mistake like that? Would a city man fail to locate the street in which he had lived?

Chancy stood shaking his head.

"I tell you it was right here—willows ringed an open place—now it's all thick with willows. See that big flat rock there? Dan'l sat—"

John Cobb and old Sam regarded him in lofty disgust. But other men were quick to seek and find the explanation. Almost at the same instant a dozen hands were laid to as many of the willows which, at the slightest tug, came up—rootless. Mere leafy wands, for the most part, thrust down into the soft earth along the brink of the brook. Other hands turned up the flat rock; it covered a shallow excavation filled with dead coals and tin cans.

"Dan'l must have gone crazy!" surmised the bewildered Chancy. "Hid his camp and gone raving off into the wilderness!"

"Not Dan'l," said old Sam. "No, not Dan'l. Not for a minute. It's somebody else's work. Dan'l's been done for; buried hereabouts, too, most likely. We'll come on signs," he ended lugubriously.

"There's one more thing you can do for us, Chancy," said March. "If we can't pick up the trail here, we can there. You'll have to show us where Dan'l found his gold."

But now March drew only a blank. There was no need, after the look on Chancy's face, for his words:

"Dan'l never showed me the place!"

CHAPTER XIV

OMINOUS, AS WITH THUNDER THREATENED

Julian Hawk stood some moments examining intently the cut ends of the willows that had been thrust into the moist earth. The crowd of men which had congregated like a swarm of bees had now fallen apart into smaller units, knots of four or five speculating freely. Some of them glanced curiously at the one man who remained staring at the willows as though they might have some tale to whisper to him. And many looked sharply after him when, like a man who had just come to some decision, he went straight to his horse.

"Watch that guy," remarked Kid French, foul of mouth and loquacious as ever. "If anybody croaked the old bird, he's the one. Know who he is, don't you? Red Hawk, they call him down in Mexico; Captain Colorado. A killer for the fun of it; think he'd wait a minute to fix old Dan'l's clock, the stake being what it is?"

The accusation might have had more weight had it come from any one less steeped in outrageous villainy than the Kid himself. Even so, many a frowning pair of eyes did travel along with the departing figure.

Yet Hawk did not at once ride out of camp. Once in the saddle he sat thoughtfully rolling a cigarette, in no haste to be gone upon whatever errand had suggested itself. Thus, out of the corners of his eyes, he saw how men fell into groups and how more than one group was watchful of what he did. Blondino did not

happen to be on hand, but Blondino's evil henchman was very much in evidence. All this he noted but to ignore. But when he saw Chancy Burns drawing aside to return to his team, Hawk rode to overtake him. He saw, too, John Cobb and old Sam, deep in earnest conversation, and judged that at any moment they might be expected to swoop down on Chancy, so was tempted to come to the point at once and before the likely interruption. But as Chancy Burns looked up at him, Hawk noted how the mild eyes could grow shrewd; he made the swift and entirely accurate estimate that the old fellow was of a mood to snap like a turtle at any stranger who put himself forward just now too abruptly, and therefore made his attack circuitously.

"You appear to have provisioned pretty plentifully," said Hawk, regarding the big wagon and its toppling load. "I came out here a bit short on two or three things; tobacco, for one. If you happen to have more than you need, I'd be glad of the chance to buy a bit from you."

Before he got through, Chancy Burns was smiling broadly, his eyes dancing with a sort of leaping satisfaction.

"Anything you want," he announced briskly. "You see, I figgered on that! Tobacco? Three-four hundred packs, I reckon. Course they'll cost you more here'n they would in town; kind of desert prices, you know. A dollar the pack; how's that?"

A sudden smile, the first in many hours, twinkled in Hawk's eyes, and twitched at the corners of his mouth. The smile so entirely got the best of him that he had to take off his hat and rumple his red hair and laugh.

"That's absolutely all right," he chuckled. "A man that has sense enough to haul a pack of tobacco all the way from Nacional for a man that hasn't that much

sense, is standing right square in the midst of his rights when he asks a dollar for it. Give me five, before the rush starts, at a dollar a throw!"

Chancy Burns scrambled nimbly up into his wagon and began ferreting about among his boxes and bundles. Triumphantly he dug up five little muslin bags for which he had paid seven and a half cents each, and exchanged them for a five dollar banknote. He tipped his head aside to beam at the bank-note, blew on it for luck, and shoved it into his overalls' pocket.

"Fortunes have got started like that," he observed modestly. "Anything else, *compadre?* Side o' bacon, say? Cowfee? Flour? Cheese? Or, maybe, a blanket—"

"I could use a good blanket," returned Hawk. "Maybe, a few other odds and ends, too, before we're done. Don't know but that I'm in luck to be your first customer."

"Oh, the stuff'll be running out fast enough," said Chancy. "A blanket? Being my first buyer, I'll give you the pick o' the lot; red, she is, with broad black stripes. Cost me three dollars, down Nacional-way. Le's see— Thirty dollars, say."

"Take it," answered Hawk. "Worth every bit of it. Now, that side of bacon you were talking about; some coffee, too. Canned milk to go with the coffee, sugar to make it complete. Got all that?"

"Shaw!" said Chancy. "That's nothing to what I got. How'd you like a house, now, to live in? Something swell and comfortable. Course it costs money, but if a man wants the best in this life he most generally pays his way. Take it from me, friend, there's due to be a sort of town grew up right here like a toadstool on a nice hot spring morning after a good warm drizzly

rain. And what's a town without houses in it, I'm asking you?"

"You've got another wagon coming with the lumber?"

Chancy Burns indicated rolls of canvas, bundles of short poles. He was about to explain, to expatiate, when Hawk cut him short. The house could wait. Just now there were other matters. In some three or four minutes of lively trading he had exchanged ninety dollars for a mere handful of things, and began to wonder if Chancy didn't happen to be right about the beginnings of fortunes. It actually looked as though a six-horse wagonload of just such freight as this might be worth, in the Blue Smokes during a gold rush, a good many thousands of dollars.

"Haven't any idea of where your pardner, Dan'l, might be, have you?" he asked, feeling that by now he and Chancy were firmly established on a good, friendly basis, and that a question or two would not be resented as coming from a rank stranger and outsider.

Chancy's eyes clouded again.

"No," he conceded gloomily. "Dan'l was safe and sound when I pulled out for Nacional, chipper as a cricket."

"And you haven't even an idea where his strike was made?"

"Nary." He shook his head and looked more downcast than ever. "You see, Dan'l never quite treated me like I was full grown yet. Same as the other boys." He sighed, and his moody eyes drifted away to where John Cobb and old Sam stood. "We're pardners in a way, us four, and in another way we ain't. I never been quite good enough to make the grade entire and all the way with them boys. They're big; that's what they are, that's the name for it. Big men, *compañero*. You know

what I mean. You've run up against men like that: big guns. Remind me in a way of Tom March himself. 'Big Moments,' they call him; might call John Cobb and old Sam and Dan'l 'Big Days.' Older'n me, too, you know, and I guess they're right saying wisdom comes along of the years." He sighed again. "Sometime, maybe, I'm going to make the grade and haul up alongside them boys in all particulars."

"I see," said Hawk, and recalled what old Sam had had to say on the subject, how Chancy was "what you might call tolerated."

"I run errands mos'ly," said Chancy Burns. "It was that way on this trip of mine down to Nacional. Dan'l he told me what was what; he didn't say where."

"Do you think, as a good many are beginning to do, that somebody did away with Dan'l?"

"No, I don't," came the short rejoinder.

"Why?"

"Dan'l's too foxy to be done away with. Dan'l's the foxiest man that ever lived, I reckon."

"Did he have a gun with him?"

"He's something like old Sam in that point, *amigo*. Double-barreled shot-gun, buckshot to the muzzle, and always close by."

Hawk hesitated, looked at Chancy curiously, then said quietly:

"Carry much truck in his pockets?"

"Considerable," said Chancy.

"Watch, handful of silver, jack-knife, bunch of keys—"

"Watch, no; he'd the sun, hadn't he? Silver, no; never had any money on him, had Dan'l. Knife, no; not in his pockets, having a big sharp hunting knife in his boot, old style. Keys, no; what would a man like Dan'l

want of keys? Specimens, mos'ly. Might say altogether."

"Ah," said Hawk, and seemed satisfied. Then, dropping his horse's reins, he offered: "I'll give you a hand unhooking your team."

"Thank y'," said Chancy.

The two had just finished unharnessing the six droop-headed horses, turning them loose to drink and graze, when John Cobb and old Sam joined them, two long-faced, austerely magisterial old fellows glaring sternly.

"Look a-here, Chancy Burns," said Cobb ponderously, "me and old Sam figger it's about time you spoke your little piece. Where'd you get all that live stock? And what went of the two mules?"

Chancy Burns at the very outset began digging holes in the sod with a boot heel.

"Had to have more pulling power for a load like this," he advised them apologetically. "Swapped the mules off, and handed over my note-of-hand to boot; said I'd pay off the difference in a couple of days."

More austere than ever were the brows bent on him; deeper and deeper did Chancy's boot heel dig.

"What you got in that wagon?" demanded old Sam.

"Supplies," said Chancy faintly. "Grub and stuff."

"Ah!" jibed John Cobb. "Grub and stuff! A six-horse team of it for four men—for three, with Dan'l done for—"

"No," said Chancy. "For more'n that, John. You see, I sort of figgered there'd be a lot of folks piling out into the hills, riding fast and light. This truck is for sale. I already sold this gent here ninety dollars worth; that made about eighty, eighty-five dollars' profit for us, too—"

As Hawk went up into his saddle he saw a curious change of expression come into the two old faces which were no longer merely judicial. A number of men began to stroll forward. John Cobb and old Sam, to the sudden exclusion of Chancy Burns, had their heads close together. Hawk rode slowly away. Turning to look back, he saw the wagon surrounded by an interested crowd. Both Cobb and old Sam were up in the wagon now, eager and active, barking out orders—and served and obeyed with an alacrity as eager as their own by Chancy Burns. Hawk reined in a moment before he passed over the ridge; Cobb's deep, resonant voice rolled out to him clearly:

"You're kind of early, gents, but we'll accommodate if you'll step along single file. Me and old Sam here now opens up a sort of emergency store, having figgered out that way we'd help you boys that come away on short rations; same time we'd make a dollar or two. Yes, there's a fifty-gallon barrel of the real stuff. Why 'n't you bring a hundred gallon, Chancy? Any man that wants a generous drink can have it, paying no more 'n one buck a drink. Tobacco, one dollar the sack."

It might have been a circus wagon surrounded by flocking boys. Hawk, riding on, judged that those two old fellows, with Chancy Burns jumping at their commands, would do a five hundred dollar business in the first few minutes.

"So Dan'l, according to Chancy, is the foxiest man who ever lived," mused Hawk, riding along. "From which one would infer foxier than John Cobb and old Sam! H'm."

With the glade lost to sight, a clamor of voices still followed him. But at last even these dwindled away, and the silence of the Blue Smokes was about him. He turned

into a crooked, dim trail leading deeper into the broken solitudes. Once, cresting a ridge, he stopped his horse to look back, not into the gorges, but across miles of desert to the Little Mesa country. At this time of day the Sentinel of the Desert was blurred by the distance, looking unreal, ghostly, a mere blur to be hit upon only by eyes which were keen and practiced and directed by one whose sense of direction was exact. Yet if a column of black smoke should stand up from it he would have seen it. There was nothing; of course, there was no signal for him and, of course, there would never be a sign from her to call to him. He wondered if she feared him less than she feard Blondino—if she hated him even more—

Ten minutes later, making a laborious way along a barren slope where nothing grew except sparse spiked desert plants, he met several horsemen returning to the camp. They looked at him curiously and passed on, only one of them dropping back for a word. This one was Tom March.

"Not leaving us, are you?" asked March, with an assumption of carelessness. Yet already Hawk knew him for a man to keep his mouth shut except when he had something to say.

"Not going far," was the answer.

March looked at him critically.

"Do you know, Hawk," he said finally, having hesitated and then yielded to an impulse, "that I believe you're due for trouble rather soon?"

"Sounds interesting," admitted the other laconically.

"And means simply this," resumed March, going on with his furrow once he had set his hand to the plow, "that there are a good number of men here who think that you killed old Dan'l."

Hawk, though his eyes narrowed, merely shrugged. Again March continued:

"You were here long enough before the rest arrived—"

"You were here yourself, Tom March, for all that I know to the contrary."

"True enough. But not near the exact spot where Dan'l had his camp. No. I didn't even see him. Every one knows that. And they know I'm not a killer."

"That's so," Hawk conceded equably. "While as to me, they don't know a thing. That it?"

"That's certainly part of it."

"What's the rest of it, March?"

"The rest is that by now there's hardly a man in the mountains who isn't dead sure that somebody killed poor old Dan'l. And the only difference of opinion that I've noted so far lies in the one point, whether you did it or if Jake Blondine is the man."

"Both somewhat natural inferences; natural, too, that opinion should split. Just where do you stack up on the proposition?" Hawk demanded sharply.

"That I have stopped to speak of it should indicate how I feel in the matter," March told him bluntly. "If Jake Blondine rode alone, as you do, if he didn't have a crowd of ruffians at his heels as he has, such as Kid French for instance, I might be longer leaping to a conclusion."

"I see," said Hawk.

"Just the same," March ran on, eyeing him as sharply as ever, a puzzled frown puckering his brow, "I have what you might call a hunch that you know more about the missing man than you are telling. Anything in that hunch of mine, Hawk?"

"Ah," retorted Hawk, and went no further.

"Oh, all right," snapped Big Moments, who knew full well the futility of driving words at a man who turned into granite before his eyes, and rode off.

It was gathering dusk when Julian Hawk rode back to the glade. And he was quick to mark how a great deal had happened during the short time of his absence. First of all, it would appear that there had sprung into being a mining town in all essentials saving one only: No mine. Otherwise the settlement was complete. There was a big wood fire blazing in the middle of what appeared to be a winding street between rows of little gray houses. Chancy's bundles of bare poles and other bundles of canvas, cut to sizes, had been snatched at eagerly. A few minutes' work had made the tiny houses, the street—the town. And Chancy's big wagon stood empty. Not altogether empty, to be sure, were Chancy's pockets. Very, very far from empty the pockets of John Cobb and old Sam. The partners had done a big day's work and were already planning on sending Chancy Burns back to Nacional for further supplies. It would be many a long day before he was forgiven for that meager fifty-gallon barrel.

But all this, seen sweepingly and understood by Hawk as he rode back, was forgotten almost instantly. For there was something a vast deal more vital afoot. Men thronged thickly—and were strangely silent. An electric atmosphere hung over the glade, and the air was charged with it, ominous as with threatened thunder. Something of deadly import had just happened—or was about to happen—

He touched his horse with the spurs and raced down into the midst of the crowd.

"What's up?" he demanded sharply of the first man he came near.

And for answer he had a curt:

"It's been found out who killed Dan'l. You're just in time to see him swing for it."

CHAPTER XV

BLONDINO LAUGHS

Dismounting in order to shoulder forward on foot, Hawk made his way through the tight-packed mass of men about the fire. The complete dark had not yet come, though winging its way swiftly; in the fading daylight, augmented by the ruddy glow of blazing pine, men's faces were revealed with peculiar vividness. Whereas expressions were by no means all the same, since some mocked and some cursed, none were pleasant to look upon. In the thick of the crowd the air was redolent of Chancy Burns' liquor.

Hawk had not stopped to ask who it was that had been adjudged guilty and was to hang for Dan'l's murder; there was little question in his mind. No question at all when he forced his way into the forefront. Blondino, with his hands lashed together at his back, his blond head held high and defiant, the look of a laughing devil in his eyes, confronted a crowd which the moment —and that same strong liquor from Nacional—had made over into a mob.

"All I ask of you boys," a commanding voice was saying gravely, the voice of Big Moments March, calm and unhastening but in deadly earnest, "is to go slow. Mistakes have been made before now—"

But they cried him down, men who an hour or two ago would have held their tongues to hark to any words Tom March cared to speak, and began calling for a rope. Blondino strained at his fettered wrists until the sweat

broke out upon his brow where the little wringlets were become damp glistening tendrils. The look upon his face did not alter; the teeth were bared, and one half expected him to burst forth into that wild laughter of his.

A man near by, who had been held back by those nearest him, suddenly broke free and bore down upon the big blond marauder. It was Kid French, and the firelight flickered on the knife he whipped out, with which he meant to slash the rope about his leader's wrists. When many hands snatched him back and flung him down, wrenching the knife from his clutching fingers, he broke into screaming, hysterical pleading and threats all intermingled and strung upon his unvarying thread of profanity. He was sobbing when they quieted him.

Briefly he drew and held the captive's eyes, eyes in which there was a sneer in payment for devotion. For Blondino, even at such a moment, must jeer at any man weak enough to weep like a woman.

Then Blondino spoke, and though the clamor of a hundred voices had been uplifted, his own bell-tones cut through it, rolled above it, and, in the end, quieted it. He did not plead, and he showed none of the Kid's hysteria. Rather he stormed at them, still with blood-vessels bulging as he strove with his bonds; he named them such names as made them all stir and wonder. If he felt fear, he showed none of it. He told them that they were sickening idiots gone drunk on a spoonful of Nacional's cheap whisky; to-morrow they'd all have headaches, they'd all be like whipped curs, their tails between their legs, afraid and ashamed to look one another square in the face. He did actually break out then into his savage devilish laughter.

But then he saw Julian Hawk where he had forced

his way forward, Blondino checked his laughter and for a moment seemed to choke with his rage. With an obvious effort he calmed himself; again he began shouting, and this time it was to hurl his accusation at Hawk.

"So you dare show your face at last, do you?" he roared. "Look you, men—fools, rather: Here's a man who's my enemy and he's none other than El Gabilan, and you all know who he is. Captain Colorado they call him down in Mexico, the Red Captain; red of head and red of hand. He and I would kill each other most joyously, given half a chance; yet there has been no chance. So he, having killed the old man himself and hid all signs of his gold, has put the job on me. You'll note how he did not have the nerve to show up until now."

Such power was in Blondino in his extremity, such force did he pour into his words, swelling sky high in his mighty voice, that every man who heard turned to stare at Hawk. And Hawk for the moment held his silence.

But others wanted nothing to do with silence, nothing to do with inactivity. They held that murder had been committed, that swift and merciless punishment should follow. Some one at the outer edge of the throng hurled a rope over many heads into their midst; an end of it fell about Blondino's massive shoulders, and for the first time, and for an instant only, the towering figure shrank back. A voice yelled: "Hang him." Another voice shouted: "Hang 'em both, if there's any doubt. They're both cut-throats anyway." Yes, they were sincere enough in holding that Dan'l had been murdered. And there was something else: Dan'l's gold seemed to be lost to them all.

The only quiet, cool members of the crowd were

those few grouped about Tom March; Bud Bell, the cowboy, Alec Farnsworth, the rancher, and a mere handful of men like them who would be as swift as any to mete out justice when they were sure, yet who went slowly, making sure. Yet Hawk could see with half an eye that their influence was for the moment of less than a feather's weight.

"I'd like to say a word or two," he said coolly.

Blondino alone answered, first with his jeering laughter, then with explosive words.

"He'd like to say a word or two. And if there's a fair man in this fool's gathering, that man will smash him in the lying mouth. Give me one hand free—"

"Hang the two of them!"

At that Big Moments March sprang forward, done now with quiet ways, stormy with anger.

"By God," he boomed at them, "you pups will listen, I tell you. I'll kill the first man that makes a move to a rope until we've heard every last word that every last man who wants to speak has time to say. All right, Hawk! what is it?"

It was not March alone; he with the few steady men backing him constituted an impassive nucleus; they were, grouped, like a great rock in a wind-lashed sea. There fell a silence, broken only by Hawk.

"Personally, I haven't the slightest objection in the world to your hanging Blondino," he said crisply.

Blondino fell to cursing him roundly, then to calling upon every man who had even the faintest notion of fair play to shut Hawk's mouth for him. But again Big Moments March roared out for silence and again it was grudgingly given him.

"Go ahead, Hawk," he commanded. "You mean—"

"That when it comes to swinging a man off into the next world, it pays to go slow."

"Any fool knows that," grunted March. "Haven't I been telling this pack of young wolves that there was nothing to get all het-up over, and no hurry about anything? Likely enough this Jake Blondine has done the thing he's accused of; just the same, as long as there is any faint shadow of doubt, a miscarriage of justice—"

"There'd be no miscarriage of justice if Blondino were to swing," said Hawk coldly.

"Look here," muttered March, "I don't get you, friend. You seem to be saying two different things at the same time."

"Blondino ought to hang; what's more, hang he will some day. It's only a little technical question now, you might say; just a question of: 'What are you hanging him for?' "

More than ever did March stare at him; his face, already clouded, looked as black as gathering thunder.

"You know what it's all about. The murder of old Dan'l—"

"I've been out of camp all late afternoon. What has happened? Find Dan'l's body?"

"Found some other things; things which belonged to Dan'l and which his pardners, Cobb and old Sam, identified. They were in Jake Blondine's outfit."

"Where that cursed Hawk-Colorado put them," blazed out Blondino, and fell again to straining at his bonds.

Hawk appeared to meditate.

"Evidence like that," he said thoughtfully, "of course calls for thought. Just the same, that alone isn't enough to hang any man. Not in a hurry, anyway; not until there's been a lot of time to consider possible explana-

tions." His roving eyes appeared to be seeking some one in the crowd. "It's always possible, of course, that some one did plant the evidence."

Blondino's jaw dropped. He appeared to find difficulty in believing that he had heard aright. Then a red flame came into his face as it dawned on him that Hawk was merely playing with him.

"You damn' little rats!" he called them, and then straightened up and squared his shoulders and bared his teeth, again defying them with his big-volumed laughter. "Little rats talking of hanging an old mountain cat they've chanced to get the upper hand of! Look out if the old cat ever breaks free!"

Kid French began to revile, his voice lifted into his profanely blended supplication and threat. As he was silenced, Hawk continued as coolly as before.

"If you boys want to hang Blondino, go ahead with it; I'll only say he deserves it. Only don't fool yourselves now or later thinking that he killed Dan'l. For he didn't. As it happens, nobody did."

They gaped at him, wordless, all stunned incredulity. His voice carried conviction. Blondino gasped; it was as though only now did he drink deep of the sweet evening air. Big Moments March, with half a dozen strides, was at Hawk's side, gripping his shoulder.

"Spill what you know, friend," he said sternly. "I thought that you knew something."

"I knew that Cobb and old Sam had sent some sort of a signal in a column of smoke from the Sentinel of the Desert. I learned that Dan'l was held to be what is termed an extremely 'foxy' individual. And I noticed how the willow ends were cut, yonder by Dan'l's camp. Not hacked at with half a dozen different sorts of knives, as would have been the case had Blondino's ruffians

done the job; all cut smooth with a big-bladed, razor-edged knife, such as Chancy Burns told me Dan'l carried. Didn't it seem a rather logical thing that Dan'l might decide to lie low, seeing such a delegation pouring into the hills? Which is what he did; packed off by himself after hiding his signs. I played a hunch and found him this afternoon. And— But Dan'l can speak for himself. There he comes!"

A thundering shout went up, a shout to be heard miles away, as they turned in obedience to Hawk's pointing arm, and saw Dan'l himself trudging down into the glade. They forgot Blondino and all Blondino's concerns, charging in a mass toward a man they had mourned—sincerely and truly mourned—as dead. And Dan'l, seeing them, flung up his short, double-barreled shot-gun, rasping out a dry admonition:

"Keep clear o' me or stop buckshot!"

Kid French alone seemed to remember Blondino. None stayed him now as his knife cut the rope about the raw wrists. He lifted eyes swimming with tears to his leader's face, and for once his words failed him. Blondino swept him out of his way and came stalking to where Hawk stood.

"Well," he jeered, his heavy jaw shot forward, his eyes bright with the emotion that goaded him, "I suppose you think I'll come crawling with a mouth full of gratitude?"

"You dirty blackguard," said Hawk contemptuously, and turned away.

Whereupon Blondino saw fit to burst into one of his loud laughs.

CHAPTER XVI

THREE AND A HALF PARTNERS

THEY perched Dan'l, protesting angrily, upon a flat-topped bowlder and cheered him lustily. Some one had snatched away his gun and in sheer exuberance fired both barrels off into the air. Again they were become boisterous boys, milling and shoving around the band wagon. Other men burned powder, firing whatever weapons were handy. They named Dan'l variously, calling him Old High Grade, Foxy Grandpa, Goldilocks, Dan Midas. A tin cup half full of Nacional whisky was passed up to him. Dan'l sniffed at it suspiciously, and promptly poured it out to the evident delight of all who saw excepting alone the man who, in a fit of generosity, had paid not a cent less than two dollars for the quarter-pint. Laughter came as readily now as had curses some few seconds ago.

But gold was the thing, and they were not long in swinging back to it. It was not to be thought that Dan'l, though he had discovered it, was to corner all the yellow metal in the Blue Smokes. Julian Hawk, holding back from the thick of the crowd, found Big Moments March standing at his elbow.

"There's every likelihood of trouble before morning, Hawk," said March casually.

Hawk shrugged, not withdrawing his eyes from Dan'l on his rock.

"I'd think there's been enough ruction for one day," he returned.

"You know," went on the other imperturbably, "considering how your and Jake Blondine's affections stack up, it was rather decent of you—"

"Rather asinine, maybe," grunted Hawk. "Hanging's too good for that man. It hurt like sin, sticking up for him—"

"Hurt the two of you!" laughed March. "He'd rather had his salvation at any other pair of hands! Well, that's over with and we're headed into what comes next. What with a moment of natural excitement, aided and abetted by all that Mexican fire-water that Chancy Burns has poured into a flock of empty bellies, there's apt to be all Hades break loose. There are a few cool heads among us that want smooth running, fair play, and decent conditions. Your attitude of this evening puts you in our number. I'd like to have you join us, back at my campoody."

Just then Dan'l's voice reached them.

"What I do I'll do my own way, and don't forget it! Maybe I'll talk to-night and maybe I won't. Leastways, however and nowise to be argured, I don't budge my foot or waggle my tongue or even roll my eyes until I've had a confab with my pardners. That's final."

"Come ahead," said March. "If we can postpone the stampede until another day we can bleed the madness out of these roughnecks."

But when March moved away to join the little group of his followers he went alone. Hawk, if he had heard the invitation, ignored it, his attention still riveted on Dan'l. He was a thin wisp of a little gray man, but one in whom a high, bright spirit ever burned steadily, one who at this moment was going to stand firmly for what he wanted against any number of insistent and impatient men.

Now, while the men about the flat-topped bowlder clamored, some good-humoredly and others irritably, Hawk marked where one big fellow made his way straight through the heart of them and to Dan'l. It was growing dark fast now in the shut-in glade, but some last glow of the dying day or some errant gleam from the fire glinted upon the fair curls of the big fellow and revealed the face of Blondino. A clean cut pathway opened up for him, and he was regarded with an interest and a curiosity second only to those inspired by the freshly returned Dan'l. He jumped up on the rock and laid a hand on Dan'l's shoulder.

"Boys," he called out loudly and in a voice which rang as clear and true as the ring of anvil and sledge, "there's been all the general skunkry pulled to-night that there's going to be. A crowd of you jumped me when I wasn't looking for it, and that's why you're alive now. I'm ready for any of you, single, double, or six at the time, that hankers for trouble. But I don't think I'll have to take you on. That's just to let you know where I stand, personally. As to what old Dan'l here says, it goes. It's fair and it's square, and I'm here to tell you he's going to have his show. Suppose the whole works of you backs up and makes way for the other old boys? When they've had their little session they'll tell us what's what."

He gave a moment for the words to sink in, then called out briskly:

"Cobb, Sam, Chancy, step up. Dan'l wants to talk it out with you."

A cynical smile touched Hawk's lips and merely hardened his eyes. This play on Blondino's part was so obvious! He ordered that done which would inevitably occur in any case. He set himself square in the public

eye when no harm of it could possibly come to him. He reminded them that not only had he not killed Dan'l, but was here to stand by him. He grasped the first thin opportunity to come his way to assert himself. He made a gesture. And that "many-headed monster thing" which the crowd had become gave him a rousing cheer. Scores of other voices called for John Cobb and old Sam and Chancy Burns.

The three old men, hurrying up on their way to join Dan'l, passed near where Hawk stood. He heard them muttering among themselves; heard Chancy Burns demand somewhat tremulously, "Can I come along, boys?" and heard John Cobb grant him a grudging, "Oh, I guess so; only be sure you keep your trap shut," and heard old Sam snap out a savage, "Hell, no! Go back to our wagon, Chancy. Run things there until me or Johnny or Dan'l can get there." And Chancy, having hung disconsolately a moment on his heel, looking wistfully over his shoulder went back to "our" wagon and stood patiently at the side of his barrel, tin dipper in hand.

He had not long to wait in loneliness. Blondino jumped down from the bowlder, singing out:

"Come ahead, boys; give the old fellows a chance to talk it out. Me, I'm celebrating to-night!" He burst out suddenly into his echoing laughter, crying rollickingly: "Having come pretty close meeting with an accident just now, I'm all set to spend a spell in right smart rejoicing. Having deprived you jaspers of the sport of a hanging party, I'll stage another sort of function for you. Step up, laddies, and Jake Blondine will buy every man-jack of you a drink, if it costs my last dollar, horse, bridle, spurs, saddle blanket, and general hardware. Whoop 'er up!"

They whooped 'er up, bearing down on Chancy's

wagon in a roistering pack, some few clapping Blondino on the back, many naming him a good sport, and some of the discerning hanging back to eye him with misgiving.

"I've got a sort of a new-born idee," said Bud Bell thoughtfully, "that it might have been just as well if said Red-head Hawk had dropped into camp about a half-hour later. That Blondine-boy don't ride pretty in my eyesight. And my nose sort of twitches, like when a man smells something."

"What you smell, Bud, is Mexico booze," laughed Alec Farnsworth.

"I wonder if that's all?" drawled Bud.

Big Moments March growled deep down in his throat.

"It's been like standing on the top of a powder barrel ever since we got here," he grunted disgustedly. "I guess we made the wrong play at the start. If we'd let Jake Blondine and the red-head shoot each other up it might have simplified matters."

"I got the suspicion," offered Farnsworth thoughtfully, "that that Hawk person is on the level. The way he spoke his little piece and saved Jake Blondine's neck for him, looks like there was some human spots in this boy Hawk."

Tom March's thoughts, already done with Hawk, had shot ahead. He could barely make out, so swiftly did darkness gather, the forms of the three old men where they stood by the big rock, heads together, voices lowered.

"If they'll keep what they know until morning," he said, "why, then, it'll be another day, another deal. The infernal poison-medicine will have run low and there are apt to be fewer sparks flying around our powder barrel. Suppose we put it up to them? They're long-headed old coots."

It was obviously the sensible thing to do. March himself started out to make his suggestion. But it was not yet full dark and he was seen and a shout went up. In a flash Blondino had started out from the others, demanding in a voice unnecessarily loud:

"That you, March?"

"Well?" returned March calmly.

"It's this way," spoke up Blondino suavely, like one who held that in duty he must say what came next, yet who felt half apologetic about it all, "the boys here all vote that the old men are to be let alone to finish their gabfest. Of course, we know where you stand and that you're a square-shot Johnny from daylight to dark, but just the same, we all feel that what goes for any one man of us goes for all."

"That so?" said March, steady and quiet and very thoughtful.

"That's it," said Blondino cheerily. And laughed. Oh, the man was in laughter's mood to-night. "There's some here who don't know you as well as others do; they only know you for a man who's made his millions in mines. And they're afraid that you might— You know," he concluded breezily.

A big stride had Blondino taken when he put himself level with Dan'l on the rock. A bigger stride now when, in seeming good humor and mere fair play, he bulked athwart Tom March's path. And March was keen and shrewd and quick enough to see that Blondino had taken his step measuredly, sure of firm ground underfoot.

"You're quite right, Blondine," he admitted carelessly.

"Glad you see it that way," said Blondino heartily. "Come, have a drink, March. Bring your friends, too; no use a few standing apart from the general herd of good fellows. Me, I'm treating to-night."

And there Blondino took his third swift, sure stride.

"Sorry, March," he concluded, never more wily than to-night. And then, swinging about he shouted: "Come ahead, boys; three cheers for Tom March."

They would have cheered for anything, and the result was a booming volume of sound. But it was nothing compared to the thunder which went up when some one —it was Kid French—sang out:

"And three more—for Jake Blondine!"

From Bud Bell came a slow, drawling:

"Say, if you'll listen sharp—put your ear close down to the ground—you'll hear the devil laughing down in his place!"

CHAPTER XVII

PANDEMONIUM

The three old men, Dan'l in the lead, came trudging down into the floor of the glade and so into the flickering light of the pine fire. The crowd gathered swiftly to hear what they had to say. The old fellow looked like a little gray gnome come down from the rugged mountains. His voice when he spoke suggested what a gnome's might have been, all dry snap and crackle as though he had caught the way of dry stalks rustling, crisp, sere leaves whispering. He brought a piney smell with him, down from his recent camp among the piñons.

The moment had its dash of novelty for every man there. Julian Hawk, who had come and gone through many years among mining camps, Tom March, who had had to do with mines throughout the West, down in Mexico, further down in South America, out in Australia, alike confronted to-night a new situation. There stood three old men, the golden secret locked away in their bosoms; here stood a pack, close to two hundred other men, on edge to make a dash to the yellow stuff the moment that its whereabouts was disclosed. The hush that fell upon them was intense. If a man shuffled his feet or cleared his throat his neighbor dug a warning elbow into his ribs. Nine-tenths of them knew no more about mining than they knew of Arabic. Some, allowing imagination to grow hot with fever, thought that before the hour was out they would

fill their pockets with fat lumps of pure gold. They wanted to rush upon the spot where Dan'l had made his strike as they might have rushed upon a place where it was said rotting chests of treasure had been unearthed. Even those who knew better than that, some few old prospectors, lean, leathery desert rats, were not spared by the hectic contagion. Life had lured them along, day by day and year by year, and from the crest of every hill they had always looked eagerly forward to the true El Dorado. The excitement of a crowd is catching; soaring hopes create a rush of wind which carries other hopes sky high with them like a lot of kites in March. And, by no means negligible, Chancy Burns's fiery liquor from Nacional, loosing tongues had loosed the most extravagant expectations along with them.

Heaps of dry fuel were flung to the fire for the sake of light. For by now it was very dark in the glade, the moon not yet having risen. Blending wierdly with the snap and crackle of the leaping flames came Dan'l's high-pitched elfin voice. He spoke only—before coming to a stop—the scant, trite words: "Well, boys, reckon I've found it!" Yet those words alone created a rustle among them, and brought forth little mutters of satisfaction, little breathless exclamations, followed hard by sudden sharp commands for silence.

"Yep," chirped Dan'l; "I reckon that's so. I've sure swung my pick nice and true at last, boys. Now I'm going to tell you—"

"Staked out your own claim yet?" called Big Moments March sharply. "Staked for your pardners, too?"

A very few of the riffraff hooted; what they wanted was hot haste and a general knocking of shins against auriferous ledges. Some one muttered: "March, he don't care who stakes first claims, him being always on hand

to buy what he wants." A man or two laughed; the crowd murmured against temporizing and called to Dan'l to "speak his little piece."

What Dan'l did was to reply to March's remark.

"Ah, you ever was a square man, Tom March, and that's a square thing you make mention of. Thank y', Tom. Well, all hands, here's what I've to say to you: I've picked a bonanza this trip, and bonanzas don't grow on huckleberry bushes. And I haven't driven a stake because I didn't calculate on nailing up a sign-board until my pardners hove in sight. Now I'm ready to locate; right this very minute. You boys seem to me all het up over something. I've a notion that with the first streak o' daylight you'll be stampeding to take a chance locating close by my hole. That's why I'm ready to step out now and sock my pick into the proper spot and let you gents have all the daylight there is to-morrow to do likewise. Which brings me along to the final remark: I got to be allowed a free hand now; and my pardners got to have the same as me. Otherwise, I don't budge."

"Fair enough, Dan'l," cried Bud Bell, and others echoed him and said: "Hop ahead, Dan'l. You and your pardners."

"Fine," said Dan'l, and then sang out: "Oh, you Hawk! Where are you, m' boy? You're wanted."

"Here I am, Danny," answered Hawk from the shadows. "What's wanted?"

"You're one of us. Jawn Cobb and old Sam and me, we want you. Pardners, all of us—"

Now those who had hooted at March lifted their voices again, and a deal more insistently, and there were others who clamored with them. A challenge from Blondino rang out warningly.

"No playing favorites to-night, old man! We'll stand for your old friends, but—"

"And what's Hawk but an old friend?" snapped Dan'l. "I've knowed him, boy and man, since he was hung together with safety pins. When we met up this afternoon—"

"Never mind, Danny," said Hawk hastily. "I appreciate your intentions, old timer, but I'd rather you left me out of it this time. There's Chancy Burns, though."

"That's so!" said Dan'l. "We'd come pret' near forgetting Chancy! Come along, Chancy."

Chancy Burns, like the boy left on the burning deck, had stood manfully by his barrel. Now, starting forward at a run, he remembered his responsibility and came to a hesitant halt.

"How about tending bar? Who's going to look out for things?" he asked.

"Let 'er flicker," retorted Dan'l. "We got something on hand a sight bigger 'n your outfit, m' son."

"There's a lot of liquor left in that barrel, Dan'l—and at one dollar the drink—"

"Ne' mind," Dan'l told him. "It'll keep, I reckon."

But Chancy Burns had his doubts; certain of the gentry who had been his best customers during the late afternoon aroused suspicions in Chancy's breast. More than one among them he felt to be not above the theft of a tin cup—or a dish-pan, for that matter—of his ardent liquor.

"Run along, Chancy," laughed Blondino, seeing an opportunity which intrigued him. "I'll buy your booze; fifty dollars for what's left—"

"Fifty dollars!" wailed Chancy. "You're crazy! There was fifty gallons in it to start with—that's two hundred quarts—and that's four hundred pints—which

is to say eight hundred half-pints—sixteen hundred man-sized drinks. Say sixteen hundred dollars—"

A mighty roar of laughter went up, Blondino's heard above the volume of it, and, as silence followed, Blondino offered to pay an even hundred dollars and bade Chancy be on his way. Chancy fell to arguing the matter, men to hooting again, Dan'l and Cobb and old Sam calling him to come along. And in the end, though reluctantly, tugged two ways, Chancy joined the other old men.

"Now," said Dan'l, "give me my gun that some smart Alec grabbed away from me. We'll go drive our stobs, us four. Sure you won't throw in with us, Hawk?"

"No," returned Hawk. "Thanks just the same, Danny."

"We'll drive our stobs, then, us four," continued Dan'l, "and when it's done I'll fire off the shot-gun. C'm' on, boys."

In single file they disappeared from the ring of fire-light, Dan'l first to pass out of sight, then John Cobb and old Sam, finally Chancy Burns, alternately hurrying and lingering.

"While we wait," invited Blondino uproariously, "we'll help pass the time away with a drink or two. It's on me, boys; I'm celebrating to-night. I'm buying the whole works for a hundred dollars; and if little Chancy Burns claims he's cheated, I'll double the bet. Line up, gents, and have a drink with Jake Blondine. It's my night, and I'm carving my initials into it."

For the most part, being happy-go-lucky and irresponsible, they heard Blondino's invitation good humoredly, even those of them who had both quenched thirst and satisfied curiosity at the fifty-gallon barrel. But there were others who began to see an ugly portent in Blondino so set on acting host to the thirsty. The rag-

tag and bob-tail, the scum (and there must be the cream and the scum of all gatherings) were rallying about him as around an elected leader. He was the sort of man who would lead his followers down pleasant lanes! The younger men of the crowd were drawn to him, attracted by his bold swagger and high hand.

Nor was there a single man here to lift a voice against the acceptance of such an invitation as Blondino's. That simply wasn't done. It did happen to be a free country.

Dan'l's suggestion that there would be a scramble first thing in the new daylight was going to be ignored, of course. Now was the time; right now, despite the dark. It would be a wild, mad game of blind man's buff, sheer guesswork; but it would be scarcely other than that by day to the majority of them. Just draw in close to Dan'l's claim, as close as good fortune made possible, and trust in luck.

It appeared on the face of it—a most deceitful face it was, to be sure!—that all concurred in a will for fair play. The fire was heaped high, and the blazes darted fifteen feet in air, shedding a ruddy, wavering light far abroad. Those whose hands were the quickest at piling on the fuel had it in mind that thus they made sure that all of them had an even break; they watched like hawks ready to call back any of their number who evinced any too great eagerness to be on the heels of the old men. Yet, as it was soon to become apparent, at least one man must have slipped away to track Dan'l's little party while the rest were concerned with Chancy Burns and his self-created dilemma.

Blondino kept the camp noisy while awaiting the shot-gun signal. No one expected it for a full hour, so many crowded willingly enough around the whisky barrel. Those were generous drafts which Blondino poured out

into the big tin cups which had come with Chancy from the border. More than once what remained of overlarge potions were flung to the fire, making their quick, fierce flames to add to the devilish merriment of writhing pitch-pine blazings.

It was with a startling, unexpected suddenness that the explosion of a shot-gun roared out above the din in the glade. Hardly more than ten minutes, certainly not above a quarter of an hour, had passed since Dan'l and his partners had vanished in the dark. Yet here, already, was the promised signal. For one galvanic instant men merely stood stock still and stared. Then, in a wild, scrambling crowd, they broke away from the fire and ran headlong toward the sound of the shot. Babbling voices were hushed; there was no sound save that of running feet.

And then came the second sound. Something had gone amiss with Dan'l and his friends. Their voices, from no great distance, split angrily through the new silence, John Cobb's voice booming like some old brazen and unmelodious war trumpet. What the words were none tarried to hear.

It was a rush, in a tight-packed mass at the beginning, like one inspired by panic in a burning building. They clutched at one another, they swept others out of their way, they struck a savage blow most heartily at the slightest excuse. Above thudding boots rose again fierce, harsh utterances; to strike and curse and run on, to stumble and curse and leap again into the race, that was the universal affair.

In that flood of some two hundred men there were some five or six who had thought to catch up burning faggots from the fire. They ran with these smoking and streaming sparks overhead.

They began calling out to Dan'l, asking him where he was. And he and the others with him stormed them with curses, yelling at them to turn back, to hold on until the signal was fired.

Then it dawned on those whose minds were open to any save the one driving thought that it had not been Dan'l who had fired off the shot which had started them running! Who, then? Some one who had sneaked out of camp and had seen where the old men had gone, and had summoned the rest before a single claim had been staked!

"Hold back! Hold back!" ordered many a runner, Bud Bell and Farnsworth, Tom March and Julian Hawk among them. "Give them their chance!"

But they had held back long enough. There was no stopping a rush like that. Each gold-hungry man of them told himself that if he paused now the rush would run by him. And they bellowed that the chance had already been given, and now they were done with waiting. And so, a few of the swift leading, a few stragglers coming on at the rear, but the greater part of the crowd still in a churning, flailing mass, they swept up the slope and struck against the flimsy wall of the four partners standing side by side like a devastating tidal wave. And well at their fore ran Blondino.

But one thought had this turbulent mass of covetous humanity—each to be first, each to claim as his own a bit of ground close to the spot where the old men stood grouped. By now all were thinking the same thing, even to the more decent, honest-hearted fellows: Some one was going to grab the pick of it all; there was going to be no further standing aside for the finder; it was now every man for himself.

Had it not been for Chancy's unhappy thought of

the whisky from Nacional, and had it not been for the evil influence of Victor Blondino and his following, the now existent condition could hardly have come about, even with the premature signal. What happened was pure madness. The four old men were hurled backward. John Cobb, catching his boot heel against a rock, went down and came close to being trampled to death. On his feet again, he beat about him with a location stake, swearing to have the blood of any man who dared come within reach. Yet they came, on and on by the dozen, scarcely hearing him, heeding him not at all, and he was swept aside, and saved the life within his battered body only by dodging aside and withdrawing.

"The roof's off the devil's house," muttered Bud Bell disgustedly. "Yon c'n smell sulphur. I might saddle my horse and go home to my mamma."

There was nothing to do, for those in whom some sanity still lived, but to stand and listen. Even to watch was, at first, fruitless. There on the uneven slope was a dark mass, weirdly threaded through by flashes of light as now and then a burning faggot whirled overhead; a blot in the night and a blot on humanity itself; an orgy of greed, a bacchanalia of gold-lust. The first man to reach the spot where the four partners had stood sought to plant himself there, claiming the spot as his own, commanding all others to acknowledge his right and move aside. But not half of his speech was finished and none of it heeded. He was borne aside like a silly chip riding the breakers.

It was a stampede of men more terrific than a stampede of fear-mad steers. It was inevitable that any with some shreds of cool reason left in them should for the moment hold back; so it became equally inevitable that those who met upon the debated ground

were more akin to wild primordial beasts than to the breed of *homo sapiens*. And what followed was a logical growth from an illogical situation.

A man carrying a streaming torch was hurled into the arms of a group of his fellows. Sparks and little coals of fire rained all about them. A yell of rage went up from a fellow burned across the face; in his pain and wrath he struck out blindly. A blow given invited more than one blow in return; never a man of them niggard with two-handed payment in full in such coinage. Fully a hundred men strove to occupy a limited space where ten would have been crowded. When a man fell he clawed another down with him—

Sharp above the sullen roar of the insane combat cracked a pistol shot. The inevitable again, since there were many loaded weapons among them. Why that first shot was fired was not to be known—whether to find a human target, whether accidentally, whether merely by some half-drunk fool blazing away at the sky. On the instant every man who was armed, feeling himself put on the defensive, snatched out his own weapon. With guns in many hands and the savage scramble at full tide, there were other shots fired. A man screamed terribly; a thunder of raucous shouts drowned his screamings; pandemonium surged back and forth.

Through the press Julian Hawk fought his way, seeking the four partners or any one of them, fearful that the old fellows might be trampled into the earth. He came upon, not one alone, but all four, at the outer rim of the vortex, drawing back still farther.

"All right, Danny?" he asked anxiously.

"That you, Hawk? All right, m' son. Listen here—"

The uproar drowned his voice. He caught Hawk by the sleeve, tugging frantically. Old Sam, at his side,

was dancing with rage, John Cobb lifting his voice in mighty-lunged invective, Chancy Burns chattering wild threats.

"Out of this, Danny!" shouted Hawk, his lips to the old man's ear. "They've gone clean crazy. Back up a bit—we'll see you through when the fools grow quiet."

"Hear what Hawk says, you boys?" shrilled Dan'l. "Back up, Jawnny. Back up, Sam. Bones is brittle on a night like this! And when the ruction's over—"

They stumbled away through the dark, now one and now another ducking his head as a bullet whined.

"Back to the camp-fire, boys!" shrilled Dan'l.

Old Sam wept audibly and, weeping, filled the air about him with the very perfume of profanity.

"Shet up!" Dan'l commanded him. "We got J. Hawk with us. We go now and hook up with Tom March and such as will be sticking with him. This game ain't played out yet. Why, it ain't even begun!"

Pursued by all that devilish din which seemed only to grow in fury, they stumbled through the dark, down the slope, and into the midst of the crowd of onlookers grouped about Tom March.

CHAPTER XVIII

BEFORE MOONRISE

John Cobb was talking angrily.

"It was like this: The very minute Dan'l comes to a stop out there and sings out, 'Here's the place, boys!' why then some low-life skunk that had sneaked after us fires off a gun. Wasn't twenty foot away from us. And then the band starts playing!"

They were in the largest tent-house brought hither by Chancy Burns, one which he had counted on making the camp store, a dozen or fifteen men. The four partners were there; Hawk, who had come with them, Tom March, and those of them who had been known briefly as a committee of ten, promptly enough forgotten. Candles, also of Chancy's providing, burned steadily, held in steady hands.

It was a hastily summoned consultation. Outside, two or three of their own number stood on guard. Small likelihood of any of those infuriated contenders out yonder thinking to turn back to camp, yet it remained that already to-night one man had slipped away from the crowd to precipitate disaster, and it did no harm to be on the alert.

"No idea who it was that followed you?" asked March.

"Nary!" chirped Dan'l.

Hawk spoke up quietly then, observing:

"When the crowd gathered about Blondino at the wagon, did any one notice Kid French? He's always at Blondino's elbow."

No; no one had seen the Kid at all during the time between the departure of the four old men and the firing of the shot.

"Blondino wouldn't go," continued Hawk. "He'd made himself too conspicuous. But he might send some one. I think we'll find out—if we ever do find out anything about it—that it was the Kid."

"Reason?" snapped March.

"Listen!" Hawk commanded. "There's your answer!"

A sullen answer it was, a roar surging ominously through the night.

"There's anything but reason in that," growled March.

"But consider it from the point of view of Blondino and such as ride neck and neck with him? Right now they've dispossessed Danny; they're standing atop Danny's gold—"

"Right now," cackled Dan'l dryly, his eyes crafty pin-points of winking light in the puckers of his old face, "they're standing atop of dirt and rock that wouldn't run six bits to the hun'r'd ton! They're not inside a good half-mile o' my diggings, with a solid rock ridge in betwixt and between!"

While they stared at him, John Cobb demanded in a voice unchanged for angry explosiveness:

"What in tarnation dum-diddles did you mean, then, by singing out: 'Boys, here's the place!'?"

"Not being suspicious by nature," admitted Dan'l with a bare hint of humor in the quirk of his mouth, "I am what they call sort o' keerful. I speculated some smart Alec might traipse along behind, it being dark. And I listened with both ears and my mouth open while we was mosying along—and I heard a sound like a two-footed animal creeping after. So I sings out just—well, sort of just for fun."

"And you weren't even headed in the proper direction!" March exclaimed.

"Nary," conceded Dan'l placidly. "Meaning to come at what I was coming at sort of circumbendibus." He took a short-stemmed, very black and very obvious pipe from his pocket and crammed it with black tobacco. "I fooled 'em," he added, and named them, one and all, a name which does not filter into polite society.

"Dan'l's foxy!" cried out Chancy Burns pridefully. "I always said that."

Old Sam glared at him; Dan'l took the pipe from his mouth to glare at him; John Cobb admonished Chancy to hold his tongue. But Bell began to laugh chucklingly and others joined him. They fell silent all together as though at some harsh command; for it was a weird, unholy thing for them to stand laughing here while just yonder, on the ridge, the night was being made terrible with violence. Men breaking one another's heads and perhaps spilling life blood—all for nothing, while Dan'l smoked his vile pipe and screwed up his cunning old eyes.

"Come daylight," said Farnsworth, "it'll not take 'em long to see they've drawn a blank."

"I don't know so well about that," reflected Dan'l serenely. "You see, I mos' generally carry a lot of specimens in my pockets. I just took time to scatter 'em nice and careful when the fracas started. They'll begin gleaning my droppings, come day. That'll hold 'em a spell, maybe."

Out of a brief, comparative silence—for always there was the sullen roar from the ridge, with now and again sharper outcries—Tom March said thoughtfully:

"And now what, Dan'l?"

While Dan'l, head cocked to the side and lips pursed

up about the stem of his pipe was considering his answer, Bud Bell spoke up with his habitual drawl.

"Maybe, I'm the only man here that's ever developed a bump of curiosity, but I got to confess there's a couple of darkish corners I'd like a squint into, with the light turned on. It's fair to middling sure right about now that it would pay for us to know what's what and who who and why and what of it!" A pair of honest, searching eyes drifted to Hawk. "How'd it happen," asked Bell, "that you knew the way to pull Dan'l out of his seclusion when you did?"

Hawk regarded him keenly.

"That can be gone into, if at all, later. Just now—"

"How's it happen," ran on Bud Bell's unhurrying voice, his look never wavering, "that all this while you never let it out that you and Dan'l had anything in common? You'd known each other—"

"I'll speak up in meeting to say we had," cut in Dan'l briskly. "That was when some years back I broke away from Jawn and old Sam and went down into Mexico. I'd known Hawk before, too, and I was glad to hook up with him down there. There was some more of us, and—"

"And," continued Bell, "I can't help being sort of curious about the close shave Jake Blondine came to swinging to-night, wondering how it happened that some of Dan'l things were found in Blondine's outfit?"

"You sure c'n do a lot of first-rate, high-grade wondering, for a young feller," grunted Dan'l.

But Bud Bell had not been alone in puzzling over these matters, and Dan'l's caustic observation did nothing to shunt curiosity aside. Dan'l seeing all eyes turned very soberly upon him at first merely cackled derisively at them, then, with the look of an imp peeping at them

out of the corners of his eyes, tossed them the blunt words:

"I put 'em there. Last night. And twigged Jawn to lead you to 'em."

After that, there was no avoiding a rather sweeping explanation. There were one or two who smiled, but their smiles were soon gone, followed by deep soberness. Jake Blondine had come a bit nearer his last exit from the earthly stage than some of them cared to remember. So now they stood awaiting Dan'l's completion of the thing he had started rolling, and their eyes, from what Bud Bell had shadowily hinted at, when not on the old weazened face wandered most often to Hawk's stern, expressionless visage. Yes, Bud had said aright; there were some dark corners asking for the searchlight.

"H'm'f!" observed Dan'l. "All a-twitter, ain't you, boys? Even you, Tom March, looking like a bee-hive, somebody just whanged a rock at!"

"I don't quite get you to-night, Dan'l," said March sternly. "To frame a deal like that on a man— Why, man alive, you came within an inch of hanging Jake Blondine to-night!"

"How'd I know the boys would act up so hasty?" asked Dan'l placidly. "Anyhow, he didn't get hanged—"

"But what if he had?" snapped March, ruffled by the old fellow's serenity.

"Why, then," chuckled Dan'l, "I'd say it was a good thing! He'd ought to 've been strung up many a year ago. Huh, Hawk?"

But Hawk stood stonily regarding the cigarette taking form between slow, bronzed fingers, and was not to be drawn into the matter. Nor was he further invited into it just then. Big Moments March meant to have this thing out with Dan'l, and saw ample reason

for forcing some true explanation even at a moment like this.

"May seem queer," he admitted, "our going into conference here while those poor devils out yonder are pulling their world down about their ears—"

"Jackass-ears," in a grunt from Dan'l.

"But," went on March, glaring at him and getting in return one of the old fellow's quizzical smiles, "Bud Bell is right about it. You've got to come clean with the rhyme and reason of all this, Dan'l."

Again Dan'l glanced, somewhat furtively now, at Hawk; and again Hawk was not to be drawn.

"Oh, all right, all right, all right," said Dan'l, chirping out his words, brisk and cricket-like. "I'll tell you a thing or two. First off, how'd Hawk find me so easy this afternoon? Well, he didn't. I found him!"

In spite of his promise to clear matters up, he had to yield to the temptation to halt there, having drawn mystification over mystery. But, under many severe eyes, he had to go on again.

"Hawk started out to see if he could scare me up," he went on. "Me, I'm hiding where the devil himself couldn't have scared me out with all his hell-hounds. But I get a good look at Hawk, and I see he's all alone, and I crawl out to say 'Hello,' not having laid eyes on him since we parted company, abrupt and sudden, those several years back, down in Mexico. And why hadn't he told anybody he knew me? Well, two reasons, I reckon. He heard folks name me Dan'l, and there's more'n one Dan'l in the world, I reckon, and he never thought of it being me. T'other reason, maybe you've noticed how Hawk don't take any prizes shooting off his face? Clearing things up, hey, Buddy Bell?"

"I'm listening first-rate," said Bell, "and it listens like more."

"I know a gent name of Rapidan," said Dan'l dryly, "who predicts how some day mos' folks is going to have noses just like elephants, what from sticking them into other folks' business—so you just keep your eye on your own nose, Buddy Bell! Oh, you're a nice boy, but I've known nice boys come to a bad end—"

"This is getting us nowhere, Dan'l," March reminded him.

"Right you are, Tom, m' boy; here we go. Why'd I frame Blondino? That's what's puzzling you? Well, you see, my pardners flashed me warning something was going wrong; smoke signal from Sentinel Rock. And I figured that if something was up, mos' likely it had a bearing on my gold here. Our smoke signals don't say everything, y' understand; we've used 'em off and on for a good many years just to sort of say to keep your eye peeled. So I peeled my eye, meanwhile hiding camp and planting a few willows by the creek and a few thorn-bushes where I'd prospected. And then I looked around and made out six-seven men riding my way, hell-for-breakfast. So I hid out. And when they came close I saw that the head ruffian was this man you call Jake Blondine. Blondino, they call him south the line."

"Knew him of old?" queried March.

"Aye! In a way, huh, Hawk? Well, in my talk with this same noncommittal Hawk-person this same afternoon, I learn that he's found out recent what I've knowed for four-five years, which is that Blondino's the man who raised merry Cain with us down in old Mexico those several years ago. Highwayman then, before then, and since then. Murdering dog then, be-

fore and since. Your own brother was there with us, Buddy Bell!"

"Yes," said Bud Bell, looking grim and hard about mouth and eyes all of a sudden, "Charlie was there!"

Hawk jerked up his head suddenly, looking at Bell with a new quickened interest.

"You're brother to Charlie Bell? And—Charlie's alive?"

"Alive, yes; that's just about all," said Bell, a wintry bleakness in look and tone alike. "Charlie, poor devil, names it a great day when he's able to drag himself outside and sit in the sun a little while. And I've been quite a spell hoping that some day the good God would be good enough to lead me straight up to the man who made Charlie over into what he is now."

That was all that his words said, but his look said much more. There was more than just rank suspicion in it; it carried challenge and perhaps a flash of warning.

"I thought that Charlie Bell was killed—that night, long ago in Mexico," said Hawk quietly. "And so he's alive—and your brother? And you think—"

"Why not go on? Finish it yourself!" said Bud Bell.

Hawk shrugged, and completed his cigarette.

"You think, then, that I had something to do with Charlie being as he is now? That I, perhaps, shot him?"

And Bud Bell answered coolly:

"That's what Charlie thinks!"

There was a little gesture on Hawk's part, and, quick as a wink, Bell's hand went to his hip. Hawk only laughed at him, saying carelessly:

"Just drawing a match, Mr. Bell. All right with you?"

"You silly sheep, Buddy Bell!" cried Dan'l. "On two

counts: One is Hawk, if he'd a mind to, could shoot four-five shots through you while you was hunting around for the place you'd put your gun. Worse'n that, the whole crowd of us got cleaned together down there, Hawk the same as me; and if Charlie Bell hit harder luck than some, he got off easier'n some others, seeing as how out of our ten men five-six, anyhow, was killed that night. And I'm asking you this: Why suspect Hawk, who was head man of us down there, and who, counting money, lost two to our one?"

"Let me ask one," drawled Bud Bell. "Where was Hawk when the whole thing happened?"

"Where was Moses when the light went out," snorted Dan'l. "Take it from me, Buddy Bell, your brother Charlie ever was a wrong-guesser. And I'm tarnation sorry they didn't hang Blondino a while ago—"

"Thank God they didn't!" burst unexpectedly from Hawk. But though they stared at that and some asked him what he had in mind, he would go no farther.

"Have we gone far enough with this confab to satisfy all the long-noses?" demanded Dan'l sharply. "Or do we sit up and tell about old man Castañares, down at the Hacienda—"

"No, we'll leave Castañares out of it, I think, Danny," said Hawk.

"And there's a girl, too—"

"And we'll leave her out, along with Castañares, Danny."

"Suits me," said Dan'l. "Now what?"

"What's this about Castañares?" demanded Bell. "And what girl?"

Dan'l looked sidewise at Hawk, and, receiving from him a curt shake of the head, admonished Bell soothingly:

"Hold on to your nose, Buddy Bell! Words have run out now, and it's time for deeds. When I asks, what next—"

"Look you here, Dan'l," broke in March seriously. "It's one of two things now: Either you old boys hop to it and drive your stakes while the crowd on the ridge is busy; or go climb on your horses and pull your freight for some other place, figuring on coming back when the storm blows itself out."

"How come, Tom?" queried Dan'l.

"It's open and shut. If you locate right now and are on your own claims when day comes, there's at least a fair chance of your being let alone; actual possession always did go a long way. But if you try to locate in the morning, with all those disgruntled devils seeing what fools they've been, they're apt to rush you. Perhaps the wise thing would be for you simply to fade out of the picture—"

"Rats!" scoffed Dan'l.

Tom March shrugged.

"Of course. Just the same, there'll be trouble—"

"Trouble?" asked the old fellow, childlike in his pretty cloak of innocence. "You don't call a little affair like to-night's 'Trouble,' do you, Tom?"

Whereupon Dan'l snuggled his shot-gun up tenderly under his arm, set a battered and dirty old hat far back on his grizzled head, and walked to the door.

"Come ahead, boys," he called calmly. "Us pardners first. Hawk, you're with us. Then, Tom March, you and the rest are free to follow. We've sifted the sheep from the goats now, and we'll take our chance on this campoody being full of white men. Let's step. What little thing we've got to do had best be done before moonrise. Ready, boys?"

"There's just one thing, Dan'l," began a hesitant voice, that of Chancy Burns, whom all had forgotten.

Dan'l looked at him with mild interest.

"Oh, you c'n come along, Chancy," he said magnanimously. "You'll count as a pardner this time; us three stakes, then you—"

"Thank y'," said Chancy. "But there was something else. That big stiff, Blondy, promised to pay for my booze, and—"

"Shucks," snorted Dan'l. and in the jostling of the men in the canvas shelter breaking for the open. Chancy's protests, though continued dismally, were drowned.

CHAPTER XIX

HANDS TOUCH, AND THE WORLD GROWS BRIGHT!

"WHERE'S Hawk?" asked Dan'l.

That was some little while later. The old man had led the way through the dark to a spot where nothing grew but a few vicious Spanish bayonets, and declared that it was here he based his hopes for his Golconda. Meaning to lead many men to riches to-night, he wanted his old friend to be among the foremost. Yet Hawk was not to be found among all those who had trooped along in Dan'l's wake.

"Now, that's funny," muttered Dan'l. "Where do you suppose he's betook himself?"

With no one seeming in haste to hazard a surmise, Bud Bell at length suggested:

"Wouldn't surprise me any if he'd oozed off to the other camp. Nor yet if he and Jake Blondine, with all their bluff of wanting to be at each other's throats, were throwing in together on the whole deal. Kind of got my goat the way Hawk stood in a little while ago saving Blondine's neck for him."

"Pho!" exclaimed Dan'l, and even in the dark they knew how he puffed out his cheeks, meaning to blow Bud's words away and out of the memories of those who heard. "Anyhow," he concluded, "Hawk mos' gen'rally knows what he's up to. Come ahead, *hombres*, and drive your stobs."

Already Hawk was in the saddle. It was still early and he was of a mind to make a certain ride and to be back

here before daylight drove the dark out of the passes among the Blue Smokes. Many a time during the day he had let his gaze drift off across the southwest and his thoughts went winging on, farther and swifter than his sight could speed. There had been no smoke signal standing up into the clear sky from the Sentinel of the Desert, and to-night there had been no ruddy glow of a signal fire. He had not thought, on leaving the Little Mesa country, to return there unless summoned—and had scarcely hope for any summons—from her. Yet now, while all others here had no mind for aught but virgin gold to be come at, perchance through bloody strife, his fancies darted in many directions and, for an abiding center, found La Güera.

Though he made all haste, it would be near upon midnight when he reached the cabin among the cottonwoods; the same distance with a good, hard trail under his horse's feet would require but a fraction of the time. But for Hawk, though from the beginning he realized that he might have difficulty in finding her, midnight was an hour entirely to his own liking. For, at least, he could be sure of leading no others in his wake to her hiding-place.

He was far out on the desert before the silver moon pushed up out of the far, low horizon. Too far for any to see him among the gentle crests and troughs of the billowing sandy wastes were there any in the Blue Smokes at his back to think of looking far out into the night. Men back there had their noses close to earth now. He lifted his face to the field of glory extending limitlessly above—and sighed somewhat wearily. Gold—and noses thrust close down to the dust. Gold—and such orgies as had burst out to-night. Gold—and robbery, murder, and bitter hate corroding the long years. There was Charlie

Bell, a wreck now, lucky for strength on some days to creep out into the sunshine, for the most part chewing the cud of memory, a vengeful and embittered man who once had been like Bud Bell now.

"They've been weary years," muttered Hawk, the upturned face harsh and grim in the starlight, the voice bleak. "Maybe, I've been just a fool to—"

But a crowd of faces rushed into his imaginings; the face of Charlie Bell, whom he had thought dead; the faces of Andy Moran and Happy Taylor and Billy Thompson, murdered that hot, hellish night long ago. The faces of others—the jeering, devilish face of Blondino.

There were still others; poor, bewildered Inocente Castañares, the little monkey-man, Perrigo. Why, there was La Güera herself. And ever and always—Blondino.

It was between eleven and twelve when he rode down into the depression studded with big, glorious cottonwoods and threaded by the little singing river. He dismounted, cared for his horse, and went on foot to the dark cabin.

And now, of a sudden, he told himself bluntly that he was a fool for his labors, that he might as well have saved himself the long night ride. For, if La Güera were still here, would she come forth through the night to a meeting with him? As he lifted his hand to knock at the cabin door he felt that it was quite like a man going into the depths of a forest and calling the woodland deer to come to him. And he even found time to wonder if she, fearful of man as she had every right to be, would trust herself at night to the four walls of this lonely house? As he had felt of the Hacienda Escondida, going there in quest of Blondino, that the place was a trap, so might she feel of this remote cabin.

Yet he knocked, softly at first not to startle her too much, then more loudly. Having no response, scarcely expecting any, he knocked again. And then he called out: "It's just Hawk, Julian Hawk, wanting only a few words with you and then going on."

He waited patiently after that. Give her time, if she were in there, to make up her mind for herself what to do. But, after a minute or two, he rapped again, called again. He put his hand to the latch; if she had feared to sleep here and had found some other shelter, then the door would be unlocked. He tried it. Locked tight.

Now he was sure that she was here. He pictured her crouching in the dark, eyes great with terror staring and seeing nothing, her heart beating wildly, too frightened to move. It was bad enough to be all alone in a place like this, a girl so very far from all others of her kind; it was worse than bad enough for her to have such definite fears as her fears of Blondino—perhaps of Hawk, too—and to know that at any moment it was possible for any one of the men she dreaded to come upon her. So he spoke again, more gently than before—far, far more gently, though he did not realize it, than Julian Hawk had spoken to any man or woman during many hard, relentless years. If she were in there she must realize that he, at least, meant her no harm.

"If you'll only answer me," he said gravely, "I'll talk with you through the door, if you like. I'll be going soon."

He waited for an answer and, so little did he truly expect one, that he was startled when her voice came to him out of the darkness—from somewhere behind him. Not in the cabin at all.

"What do you want—with me—señor?"

He turned swiftly, looking for her. The desert moon,

gleaming through the cottonwoods, set the glossy leaves glittering and made great black patterns of the shadows beneath. Near one of the big trees, a score of paces away, a little figure dimly seen, yet, as he sensed, poised for flight, stood La Güera. She was bareheaded and a moonbeam glinted in her hair.

Outside—and the door locked—

"There is some one inside?" he asked, wondering.

There was a hint of hesitation, then her quick:

"Why do you ask? What—"

"You'd scarcely be outside with the door locked against yourself unless there were some one else—"

"Oh." He fancied in the syllable that he caught a breath of relief; when she spoke again it was with a slight access of assurance. "You have not told me what you want?"

But for the moment he meant to keep to the point.

"You mean that, whoever it is who is in the cabin, it is a friend of yours?"

"Why, of course!"

He laughed softly.

"True—only in case the solitude itself befriends you. As, I suppose, it does."

"What do you mean?"

What he meant was that that, "Why, of course!" of hers had been too eager; only as she spoke did she see how she might make a locked cabin seem to befriend her, an empty cabin which it was to be supposed harbored those who would run to her assistance at the first call. She had fastened the door from within and had crept out through a window; perhaps while he had stood knocking. Or—well, in any case, he did not believe that there was any one within.

"You need not be afraid of me, señorita," he said quietly.

"I am not afraid."

"Because you think that I believe you have protectors at hand?"

Again that hint of hesitation; then an impulsive:

"No! It is not that. I think that the time is coming. señor, when fear is going to fall away from me. I can feel it. All my life I have lived in vague dread; during the six weeks that I was at the Hacienda Escondida I knew nothing but fear. It is growing different. Why should I be afraid of you?" she ended breathlessly.

"So," said Hawk, "something has happened then? Something to knock the fetters off? While you have been here, alone, something has happened? What is this something, La Güera—*La Güera Perrigo?*"

"Why do you speak like that?" she cried, all eagerness again, it seemed to him. "And why do you use such a tone when you call me—La Güera Perrigo?"

He came a step or two nearer, so did he want to make something of the expression of her hidden face. And, so did she hang on his words, she saw him coming closer and did not whip back from him. Or was it true that fear began to fall away from her?

"Tell me," she commanded, a touch of imperiousness in her clear voice, in the poise of the lifted head. And so he did catch a glimpse of her face, the moonbeam slipping from her hair to her eyes.

"Is there a name you like better, La Güera?" he queried softly. "Shall I call you the Señorita Juana?"

"Oh!"

"Ah, there is something in a name after all," he said curiously. "La Güera Perrigo—or Juana—"

"Go on, señor! Do not torment me—tell me—"

"Shall we say—Juana Castañares?"

A glad little cry broke from her. It was the first note of sheer joy he had heard from her. Poor little La Güera, there had been far more of agony in her days at the Hacienda Escondida than he could know.

"It is true, then. And you know— Oh, señor, you will tell me that it is all true? You have ridden here to-night to tell me that. You will not make mock of me. And what I have just learned is not only a mockery, is it, señor? And you—you, though you are that Captain Colorado—you will befriend me, señor."

"Yes; though I am that same Captain Colorado, I would befriend you, I think, señorita."

"And it is all the truth?"

"I begin to glimpse truth among the lies; it is like seeing faint fitful flames in a great volume of smoke!"

"But in the end the flames brighten and break through! They even devour the smoke!"

"And you no longer fear me?"

"I tell you I begin to think that the day will come when I have no fears left—of anything."

"Not even of Blondino?" he said rather sharply.

She winced at that and shrank back against the big cottonwood. But in another instant she straightened again and put her head up even higher; the moonbeam came back to make tender midnight pools of her eyes.

"I must be going soon," said Hawk. "If you'll invite me to come in we'll light a fire, for it's cool enough to have one; and we'll even scare up a meal of some sort. I haven't had my supper and begin to think a cup of coffee and a bite of something to eat would not be unwelcome."

"One moment only, señor."

She ran, glancing like an embodiment of moonbeams

herself through the shades dropped by the cottonwoods, vanishing beyond the cabin. Presently he heard her light, quick footfalls inside, a bolt was drawn or a bar let down and the door stood open to him and the moonlight. He struck a match as he entered; she held out the candle toward it.

"A good omen, no, señor?" she said lightly, as the flame caught at the candlewick and expanded and brightened.

"Our hands have touched, and lo, the world grows bright!" said Hawk, completing the sense of her words and going on beyond them, and laughed.

CHAPTER XX

PERRIGO EVER WALKED IN FEAR

She moved away to place the candle on the table; he closed the door behind him and looked about curiously. A cruelly bare, bleak place for a girl like La Güera to be imprisoned in, all alone. Yet no longer so grimly untidy as when he had first seen it. She had busied herself here, sluicing out with many a bucket of water, tidying generally, and achieving a result which would make the place unrecognizable to any of the old men who "holed-up" like old bears here. . . . In a corner, on the floor, were a number of clean, fresh grain sacks which she had discovered in the barn and had spread here for her bed.

"You keep the door locked, and some other way open? So that if any one comes you can slip out at the first sound? You cannot think of staying here long, señorita?"

"Oh, no! I must go. I am torn two ways, señor."

"We'll have a blaze in the fireplace," said Hawk. "Better than that silly old stove for cheer and warmth, and will do first rate for my pot of coffee. I'll not make you eat this time as I did last," he added, with the suspicion of a smile, "but maybe you'll join me in a cup of coffee. And, then, what if we compare notes? I ran across an old friend of yours to-day."

"An old friend—of mine?" She shook her head doubtfully. "What old friend have I?—or new friend, either!"

Hawk found a battered old black pot and made coffee. Meantime La Güera, with many a quick searching look at him when his eyes were not upon her, rummaged in the cupboard and set forth a supper which certainly could have had no great appeal to any but a truly hungry man, yet which satisfied her guest amply. They sat down, the table between them, and Hawk at last answered her question—or questions.

"For a new friend, maybe you'll let me qualify? For the old one there is an old man who seems to go generally by the name of plain Dan'l; Danny, I used to call him. Were occasion to demand a signature from him, he'd sign himself, I fancy, Daniel McAndrews. Remember him?"

"No." Again she shook her head. "I never heard of him. Who is he?"

"As it happens, he's a pardner of John Cobb and old Sam. I knew him some years ago, down in Mexico; he was a member of my party then, a party," he added with the first hint of his old sinister grimness which she had noted to-night and which suddenly started her old fears up, "which came to grief. Never mind that," and he banished the shadow which had darkened his eyes so flittingly. "Merely in passing I am assuring you that I've known this Dan'l a good long time and that though as full of guile as any man you ever met, none the less he's as honest as a midsummer day is long. With a friend, of course. And he seems to be a friend of yours."

"I never heard of him!"

"You've forgotten; Danny said that you'd be sure to forget. For, according to him, you and he were friends —about a dozen years ago—and then for but four or five days!"

A puzzled frown had gathered while he spoke, but

all of a sudden vanished as her face brightened and she looked at him in wonderment.

"But I remember! I was just a little bit of a girl then—we were on our way from some little, far away village. I remember nothing of it except that there was a bright garden with flowers and there were big butterflies and a parrot. And we were coming northward, I think; going to the convent—"

Hawk interrupted to say interrogatively: "We? That means you and Pedro Perrigo, doesn't it?"

She nodded hurriedly and ran on, her hands clasped before her now, a shining brightness in her eyes. To bring up an old, old memory, dim under the passing of the years which carried childhood so far away, seemed to excite her strangely. Yet Hawk, having at least an inkling of her mental processes, fancied that she was like one who, passing back over an old familiar road, hoped wildly to come to some landmark which was going to point out something very dear to her, something for which she was yearning.

"He was hurt—"

"He? Of course again you mean Perrigo?" And when she nodded, a baffling look in her eyes, he added quietly: "And you know, now, that this Perrigo was not your father?"

Her lip trembled and a new starry brightness in her eyes bespoke unshed tears. Again she could only nod. But presently, while Hawk got up and moved the coffee-pot about among the coals—and she flashed at his bent back the first grateful look she had ever turned on him—she went on speaking.

"I know, now. I know that the world will call him a very bad man. Oh, it makes me shudder, knowing at last what he was and the things he did! But ever and

ever and ever at the urge of Victor Blondino. And—in his way—this little Papa Perrigo was good to me. I—I think he loved me, at the end, as though I were in truth his own daughter. And I— Oh, Santa Maria! I can pray for his soul—"

"He'll need praying for, where he has gone, that little Perrigo," grunted Hawk with small compassion. "But you will go on with your story, señorita? You and Perrigo, those long years ago. He was hurt—"

"Yes. Oh, it was so long ago, and I was so little then. it is hard to remember it all. He had a bad wound. He had told me that he was thrown from his horse and fell among sharp, flinty rocks, but I am sure that it was another sort of wound! We were somewhere—I don't know—some far out place; and an old man came to us."

"That was Danny."

"He was good to me, I remember that; so good that for years after he had gone I kept on hoping that some day he would come back! You see, I had so few friends, señor!"

"And Perrigo? Do you remember even that he thought that he was going to die?"

"How should you know? Oh, of course, the old man told you. Yes, I do remember that. But he was always going about in fear of death, señor."

"And always on the very verge of sending for a priest, that he might avail himself first of full confessional."

"That, too, is true. Yet, when he did die, there was no priest for him."

"Blondino saw to that! And now I will tell you a part of what Danny told me. Perrigo, even those long years ago, fearing that some day his death would snatch at him all without warning, and fearing to die unshriven, with his soul heavy with his sinnings, had employed his

own peculiar methods to come at a compromise which suited him, to allow him free scope to serve the devil —and Blondino—while he lived, yet to go freshly washed to God when his time came! He was very ignorant and very superstitious, but he had some schooling and could write."

"Yes. I know."

"And you knew that he had made his full confessional on paper?"

"I did not know what it was until later, until just a few weeks ago."

"You did not guess that in any way it concerned you?"

"No. I had no suspicion of that."

"But at last you do know?"

"Yes. Only this very day."

"You will tell me about it, señorita?"

She opened her lips to speak; he could see in her eyes that she was about to tell him everything. Then her look changed and she hesitated and remained silent.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

"You told me that—that it was not you—"

"Not I who handed him over to his much dreaded end? Nor was it. That was Blondino's work. For if Blondino did not know of the written confession, he did know that Perrigo, in terror, asked for the priest. So Blondino put an end to that danger and to Perrigo at the same time. I was outside and the window was open. With one fearful blow of his first, a blow to fell an ox, Blondino crushed his skull."

"And you—you did nothing!"

He shrugged and answered her bluntly.

"There was nothing to do. The thing was over before I saw it coming! To have stopped it, having no warning, would be like stopping a stroke of lightning.

And after? Still there was nothing I could do. Step in and accuse Blondino?" He laughed his old curt, unpleasant laugh. "When all knew that I had shot him, all would say that I lied to save my own neck. To be sure, I could have dropped Blondino with a bullet from where I stood, but—"

He ended as he had begun, with a shrug.

She sat with her face hidden in her hands, caught and swirled away from him in the strong, dark undertow of such thoughts as had their source in the events on which they had dwelled. Hawk gave her her moment of silence, glimpsing, if only darkly, how it was with her. He, too, fell to pondering. Had she hid her face from him because she did not believe?

"Why," she demanded abruptly, "are you interested in all this?"

Why? That interest began with Blondino, centering there fiercely, looking toward what Hawk alone knew. But during these last few minutes he had been thinking of Blondino less than of this other of Blondino's victims.

And so he ignored her question and said in return:

"Perrigo's papers fell into your hands?"

"When I was leaving the Hacienda, I ran to my room. His room was next, and I remembered what he had told me a thousand times: if he died suddenly, without the offices of a priest, I was to look under a certain loose board in his room. What I found there I was to carry away with me. Yes; in this way the papers came to me."

He brought the coffee, poured out two cups, and set the pot back on the hearth. Then he stood by the table, looking down on her bowed head.

"Of course you have wanted to go back to the Hacienda?"

She looked up quickly, her eyes shining.

"Of course! I have been thinking, thinking—"

"And wondering if you dared go back."

"Yes. I am afraid."

"You must not go back alone," he told her with slow emphasis. "Blondino is still in the Blue Smokes, yet who knows when he may have reason to make a dash back to the border? And, even in his absence, there are men of his there—El Topo for one; others and worse, no doubt."

"And yet, señor—"

"Yes; I know. For in Perrigo's papers he told you the truth about yourself. What Blondino, and he at Blondino's orders, have so long kept hidden from you. And now you would return to your real father—to Señor Castañares!"

Again that shining look in her gray eyes.

"Oh, señor, it seems so wonderful! That poor Señor Castañares—how my heart always went out to him. How they have made him suffer—what year-long agonies—"

"And now you know at last who it was who gave you your eyes, La Güera?" he said softly.

"Her name, too, was Juana. She is the one in the painting, with the roses. He always kept fresh roses on the table in front of her."

He inclined his head gravely.

"Yes, her name, too, was Juana. And when the other night in the garden Señor Castañares saw you, just a glimpse of you in the moonlight, and called out 'Juana!' then Perrigo, overhearing and already grown suspicious—"

"Oh!" She started to her feet, understanding for the first time now. "Perrigo thought that, when he called me 'Juana,' he had already told me the truth—or was just about to tell me—"

"Perrigo, I think, feared that only then the truth was dawning on Señor Castañares. For, as the thief sees an officer lurking in each bush, so does one like Perrigo, hiding a secret, fear always its discovery. And Perrigo's knife—"

"Hush!" She shivered at the memory. Then she looked on Hawk with new eyes. "Had it not been for you, it would have been murder done. And I, seeing, would have run to—to Perrigo, instead of to my real father!"

"But no murder was done, none would have been done had it not been that Perrigo's fear of death drew his death down on him."

"I wonder that you know all these things, señor. Of me, of what happened so long ago—"

"I learned much from a certain Chavez, nicknamed the Squirrel. He, too, like Pedro Perrigo, had something to tell when he was at the end of a long, crooked trail, though his telling was for other reasons. I guessed at some things. And then, meeting Danny, I learned still more. He, too, has suffered at Blondino's hands, and he is as wise as he is old. He sends you his greetings, by the way, and says that some day he wants to see again the little girl whom he has remembered all these years."

"He knew you were coming to-night?"

"Not unless, being wise, he guessed! No, I told no one. But he knew that when there was the chance I should see you again."

The words just slipped out. When there was a chance he would see her again.

"And now, señor?" she said hastily.

"Why, now I had best be going. I have seen that you are all right here, and I have had you confirm something I was most anxious to have confirmed. I must

be back at the Blue Smokes before daylight. Before I go—have I assured you that I would be your friend?"

"Yes, yes, señor. I shall not doubt again. And I am grateful."

"Then you will listen to a suggestion from me? Do not think of returning to Nacional. It would be to walk into danger. Before long, I hope, we shall have the way smoothed."

"My heart calls me to return to the Hacienda," she whispered longingly. "Yet my fears hold me back—"

"Not your fears; your better judgment, rather. And you will stay here a little longer? It must be a nightmare for you, all alone! Yet I feel that you're safe here. Men may pass by, going to the mountains; none who will trouble you, I hope. And none need discover you here. I—"

She had risen, and as she put out her hand he thought that at last she was offering it to him, meaning to say a friendly good-by. And then he saw that it was lifted hastily in warning, and that a sudden look of fear was in her eyes.

"Sh! Listen!"

"What is it?" he whispered back, listening yet hearing nothing.

"Sh!" she commanded him again, and now he, too, heard something as she added in a faint, frightened whisper: "There is some one outside!"

Hastily he extinguished the candle. The fire had burned low in the fireplace, being now but a dimly glowing bed of coals. In the dark they stood very still, ears strained to the faintest sound.

CHAPTER XXI

"I HOPE YOU GO FOR YOUR GUN, KID FRENCH! FOR GOD'S SAKE, PULL YOUR GUN!"

THE silence was profound. Nothing stirred either within or just without the lonely cabin. After a little while of tense waiting they heard, faint and far off, the eerie calling of an owl.

Hawk stooped closer to whisper a command for continued stillness on her part and went tiptoeing to the door. Old boards creaked dismally underfoot now, complaining as ancient floors would seem to do only by night when all else is hushed. He opened the door slowly; its hinges, too, lent their whining voices. He stepped out, for an instant only framed in moonlight, vanishing the next instant in the shadows.

"If there is some one here," he was asking himself, "why all the secrecy? Who would it be, and on what errand?"

He made a circuit of the cabin, always within a dozen paces of its walls. He stopped frequently to listen and peer in all directions. No one; only the still cottonwoods, inky black in shadow, silvered where the moon fell on the glossy young leaves. The night was breathless; calm and serenely beautiful. One felt peace glancing earthward from the clear, luminous sky.

Having completely circuited the cabin instead of returning through the open door, he moved still farther away from it. He made a second, greater circle, suspicious of every shadow, listening for any sound. He

penetrated deeper into the grove, threaded little wandering paths, and came abruptly upon that which one might allow himself to consider the cause of all this suspicion. A white horse, where it had been indulging in a moonlight ramble, lifted its head high and sniffed at him.

Hawk came to a dead halt, pondering the matter. The horse carried no saddle. Had it been ridden here and turned loose a few minutes ago? The animal, seeming satisfied, dropped its head to nibble at the lush grass near the creek. Hawk went forward again, approaching it slowly. A gentle, quiet-mannered beast it proved to be, regarding him with little interest when he came up to it. He caught it by the mane, then ran his hand along its back. No, it had not been ridden just now; too cool for that and dry. Nor was there any ruffling of the hair where a cinch would have left its trace.

"One of Cobb's horses, most likely," mused Hawk. "One of the two which Blondino drove off, then turned astray."

Turning back to the cabin then, he saw the girl standing in the doorway, and called out cheerily to her from some little distance:

"It's all right. Just a horse poking around."

"But—there are no horses here!"

"Come out and look at this one. I think it's one of the two John Cobb was driving when Blondino's outfit put him afoot the other night."

She came out to meet him, hurrying through the bright moonlight, all eagerness to slip into the concealing darkness where he stood and, perhaps, to be again close to him. For fear did keep surging back, and somehow there was less fear where he stood.

"Was one of Cobb's horses white?" he asked.

"Yes. A white and a black one."

"Sure," he chuckled. "Of course. Blondino wouldn't keep it always; men hereabouts don't hang on to stolen stock any more. And, of course, the horse took its good time in coming back home. No doubt the other will be hanging around somewhere."

He heard her sigh of relief. Yet he noted how she kept looking all about, her eyes drawn to all the darkest spots; and when she spoke her voice was hushed and uncertain.

"Yes. That's it. There wouldn't be any one here—"

He laughed reassuringly. But he looked down at her keenly, and was frowning dubiously even while he laughed. He knew full well that she had a night of terror ahead of her, yet what could he do about it? Was he to turn aside from a grim, steely purpose of many a year's duration for the sake of a girl's frightened fancies? And just what could he do for her? Take her back to Nacional? That would be into real danger, for Blondino would learn of it, and at last he knew why Blondino would sweep over many a barrier to have her back in his power. Put her once again below the border and let Blondino know, what chance would she have then? And, after all, left here alone, she was perfectly safe—if no one knew! That was the whole thing; she might spend a shivery night, yet the night could pass as even worse nights passed, and in the morning she would be all unharmed—if no one knew! And who but himself and the old men, who would keep their lips locked, could know?

"Of course," he cried heartily, harking back to her faltering words, "there's no one here. Come back to the cabin and—"

The very heartiness of his exclamation struck start-

lingly loud upon her nervous tension. She seemed to shrink into the shadows as she protested anxiously:

"Not so loud! If any one—"

"Nonsense!" laughed Hawk. "Let me go back to the cabin with you. You'll have a light, and it will help chase a lot of fancies away. Then you'll get your door locked, and I'll be on my way. And I'll ride back to-morrow night, if you'll let me; every night, for a while."

She returned with him in silence, and silent she still remained, though he continued talking lightly and always cheerily. He lighted her candle for her and put it on the table and turned to go. So casually indifferent had he become that she stiffened under his regard and a surge of color ran flaring up into her cheeks. Head up, lips compressed, she saw him go to the door.

"Good-night, La Güera Perrigo," he called pleasantly, and clapped on his hat and was gone. Nor was he even sure that she had answered him; the door closed hastily, the bar fell quickly into place. And Hawk, with never a backward look, went for his horse and rode away, headed again toward the Blue Smokes. Through the narrow, rock-jawed pass giving access from the watered, sunken valley to the desert's rim he rode warily, his rifle under his arm. He climbed the steep gradient, left rocky path for shifting sand, and, a dark figure in the full moonlight, drifted along north and eastward.

In the cabin behind him La Güera crouched by the dying coals in the smoke-blackened fireplace. She had put out her candle hastily, preferring the comparative dark; the glow from the bed of coals was just enough for companionship, yet did not pour out so much light as even a single candle. She felt impelled to draw back into hiding; she told herself over and over a hundred times that it was only a terrified imagination which so

insistently told her that what she had heard had not been the white horse; that, despite Hawk's search and assurances, there was some one lurking outside. Some one whose very presence here was filled with menace to her; some one who waited, biding his time, who knew her to be all alone now; some sinister figure standing off there in the dark, peering at her window, stealing toward her door—

How she had longed for Hawk to stay! How she had longed to beg him to take her with him—anywhere! That was why, at the end, her lips had been so compressed; to keep herself from pleading with a man, scarcely other than stranger to her, who was already turning his back on her. Even his manner as he left had somehow dropped bars down between her and him. He had been friendly, cheery—oddly remote at the same time. His thoughts, she felt, had already quitted her and were running afar from all that this little green oasis valley held, speeding on the track of his own interests. He was in such haste to be back in the Blue Smokes—where Blondino was.

If Blondino were still there!

But what if Blondino were here? If any one had followed Hawk to-night, who could it be more likely than Blondino? Was it he who hid and waited, unhastening since at every moment she was farther separated from all succor, more alone, and more defenseless?

She realized all the while that she was frightening herself, perhaps inexcusably. Some little sound had started up her every-ready terror, and now the very brooding quality of the hushed silence bore upon her like a weight to crush every instinct of hope. Hawk had been so very sure that everything was all right—

But had he been as sure as he gave her to believe?

And what did she know of him, after all? Only that he was, as he himself admitted, that Captain Colorado of the South whose reputation, as it had reached her ears, was very little different from that of Victor Blondino. True, when she was alone with him and therefore powerless, he had offered her no insult or menace, and had even treated her with a strange gentleness. There had been moments when, looking into his eyes, she had trusted him without reservation. But there were other moments of doubts. Just now, even while speaking so cheerily and heartily to her, it had seemed that his mind was elsewhere, that he was in some new haste to be gone. Did he, too, sense another presence than their own? Did he, too, know what it was to feel icy fear? Was he fearless, as she at times deemed him? Or did he also fancy some one hidden in the black shadows and shrink inwardly at the dread of an assassin's bullet? Brave man or coward, which was this Red Captain?

"He was in a hurry to go! All the while, after I heard something creeping so stealthily. He did talk out, louder than before—saying that there was no one—that he was going immediately—"

So, while Hawk rode through the clear moonlight and into the desert, La Güera grew numb with crouching so rigidly, harkening fearfully for the sound of a step, for a hand on the latch. Her thoughts, shuttling back and forth, touched in time upon every gesture of his, every word he had spoken. Those words at the end, what had prompted them? "Good-night, *La Güera Perrigo!*" When he had known—

A bat fluttered by chance in at her open window. So on edge were her nerves that she came close to screaming out aloud. Fascinated, she watched it as it winged

its crazy way back and forth, back and forth, lost in the dark most of the while, seen at times as a vague blur. At last it darted out again, and she sprang to her feet and ran to the window, meaning to close the heavy shutter. But as she raised her arm a hand shot through the opening and closed tight upon her wrist.

For a fearful moment she was powerless to move or to cry out, rigid with icy terror. Then scream after scream broke from her, and she fought wildly to free herself. That grip upon her wrist! It had frozen the blood within her, now it flamed as hot as a circlet of fire. It was like a red-hot iron manacle riveted to its place. She screamed again, stranglingly as in a nightmare. A face, dim, indistinguishable, and therefore a thousandfold more terrible than any face clearly seen, no matter how horrible, appeared at the window. She struck at it frenziedly with her free hand. And now that hand, too, was imprisoned, the second wrist locked in a fiery clasp. Steel bands burning into her flesh! She turned sick with terror; dizziness, like a great black flood, engulfed her; her knees weakened; she was about to fall.

Her captor must have felt the sudden relaxing of her strained muscles. Nimble witted, he availed himself of the moment. Her two wrists were caught together in one of his hands. As quick and agile as a cat, he drew himself up and slipped in through the window.

All the while she thought that it was Blondino, Blondino whom she had so dreaded since the first time his cold, bold, blue eyes rested on her. To stand in his pathway now was to stand in the forefront of an avalanche; to ask mercy of him was to plead with a blood-lusting beast of the jungle. Hope, which dies so hard, died within her.

He had spoken never a word, being busied with endeavor and willing enough to postpone talk. As she grew limp in his clutch, half fainting, he loosened his grip, and she tottered backward and away from him, coming to a halt only when her shoulders were against the log wall in a corner near the rock chimney. And now he spoke, and now sick hope flickered wanly again —for it was not Blondino!

What his first words were she did not know. They did not matter. The only significant portent was that of the voice itself, since it proclaimed that the man was not Blondino. Beyond that, the very intonation and quality of his speech acted toward reviving hope within her, for the words, be they whatever they were, were softly, gently, even pleasantly spoken, the quiet utterance singularly musical for a man's. Surely, surely there was no threat in them!

And so she asked brokenly, her heart beating so wildly that she must stop and falter before she could have the simple words out:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

He was slight, almost girlishly slender; that much she could make out in the dim, faint light from the dying coals. Of his face still she could make nothing.

He answered her lightly, affecting or feeling a bantering carelessness strangely unconvincing at such a moment.

"Me? I'm Kid French. What do I want? You, my pretty pet."

She found it hard to keep her teeth from chattering. From blazing heat she was swept back into freezing cold.

"What do you want—with me?"

"I want a good look at you first," he laughed insolently. "For that we'll have the candle going again.

And then we'll have a good chat, like you and him—a good heart-to-heart talk. I've heard of you, La Güera *mia*. And I'm human, you know. And I've an eye for a pretty girl. If you are pretty, eh? And, with Blondino making a set at you and Red Gabilan running your way, I'll bet you are!"

He swept a match along his thigh, found and lighted the candle on the table, and then stood regarding her with a twitching smile. And, as though he meant the examination to be mutual, he shoved his hat far back and let his own face be seen. She saw his girlish prettiness, but only in passing; intuition aided her quick perception to rivet her attention upon the ugly cruelty of the mouth with its perpetual sneer. The dreaminess of the eyes was belied by the rank viciousness of the lips. And, too, there was ever that changing light in Kid French's eyes, a devilish spirit stirring deep down in pools of molten jet.

"You are nice to look at," said the Kid, and swore softly under his breath, surrendering to swift admiration and tainting it at birth with his eager oath. She flinched and he laughed at her. He took a sudden step to her, and she cried out sharply:

"Don't dare put your hand on me! I—I have a friend who—"

"Don't dare, huh?" How the lights flickered in his eyes! "For you have a friend who— Who what? Who's a damn' fool, pretty pet! And for all the good it'll do you to call on him, why he might as well be dead and buried deep down."

"He is coming back—"

"Yah!" jibed the Kid, and fell to chuckling, neither moving forward nor back, richly content to stand where he was and watch her shrink back from him. "Coming

back, is he? This friend of yours, this Red Gabilan?"

She could scarcely control her voice; from between dry lips came her sibilant:

"Yes!"

"Coming back—to-morrow night!" he taunted her. "Oh, I heard it all; how you're to wait here for him; how he's to scoot back to the Blue Smokes, like he'd never left! How he's to come again. If I hadn't stepped on a dead stick, making a racket, maybe I'd heard even more!"

"What do you want?" she asked him the second time.

He stepped back at last and sat down on the edge of the table. She glanced at the door; he caught her look and laughed at her.

"What I want," he said pleasantly, "is to get it into your pretty head, to begin with, that no one's going to interrupt you and me. I took time to make sure that that Johnny Hawk was on his way; I watched him ride out through the pass and a good way out into the desert. Maybe I'd have watched him a bit longer, if I wasn't all het up to run back for a little visit with you." He began rolling a cigarette, making a somewhat youthful play at being a cool hand at wickedness. "Why didn't I shoot him out of his saddle?" He shrugged in further affectation, nonchalant to the final degree. "Just because I didn't get a sure-shot chance, that's why. Wasn't going to take on anything that wasn't dead sure—having already the dead sure thing of you here and him gone!"

"You haven't told me—why you are here—"

"I told you! Because I want you. Whether for myself or for Jake Blondine—"

"Blondino!" she cried in fresh alarm. "You are one of his men?"

"I'm my own man, Big Eyes. Ever was. Yet Blon-

dino's my idea. If there ever was a man who's got all I'd like to have, who is all I'd like to be, why, it's him. And I know he'd thank a man for putting you back in his hand. Cold?" he jeered, seeing how a spasm shook her.

Was she cold? Her brain was on fire! Cold? Her brain was not on fire, but was merely racing madly, wildly. Thoughts shot through it, flaring like streaks of lightning, making various considerations stand out in brilliant illumination, leaving them in utter dark. Now the thought of a fire, at a time when all the while she was longing for the only friend she had and who was even now riding away, recalled something which he had said to her on the other occasion when he had left her here. She was to light a signal on Sentinel Rock, and he would come to her!

"Well?" snapped the Kid, eyeing her curiously. "Gone to sleep?"

"I—am—cold—"

She could not get to the lofty peak—but there was a fire in the fireplace. Could that be made to do? If she piled wood on, great dry heaps of it, would not a shower of sparks, would not some leaping flames even, go shooting up out of the low chimney? Might Hawk turn in the saddle? Might he see, and by some wild chance, might he understand? So yearningly did she send forth her heart's still call for him, might he not hear it even across miles of desert?

"You're scared, that's all," laughed the Kid. "But have your blaze, if you like. The more light the better —God, you're a keen kid!"

She had moved eagerly toward the wood-box, but whipped back as again he took a quick, nervous step toward her.

"Why so shy, La Güera—Fair One?" said the Kid impatiently. "I ain't going to kill you, am I? I ain't a cannibal that eats little girls, am I? No, you don't! You can't dodge out of your corner, and you can't get away— Got you—"

Just then a voice, cold and deadly, spoke from the open window. It was a quiet voice scarcely above an undertone, yet it burst upon them like an explosion:

"I hope you go for your gun, Kid French! For God's sake, pull your gun!"

CHAPTER XXII

RIDING

KID FRENCH, for once in his loquacious life, could only stare, stricken speechless, his jaw dropped down, his eyes bulging. The shock of surprise in its effect was like a clean, hard blow that stunned. He had been so sure that he was safe from all interruption, so confident that he had seen the last of Hawk for to-night. And here was Hawk's voice ringing ominously in his ears, here was Hawk's face framed in the window, a pair of eyes glaring furiously into his, and—to hold even a wild, young devil like the Kid frozen to his place—Hawk's rifle, catching the light, its muzzle not half a dozen paces from the Kid's breast.

But no imaginable circumstance, short of one to extinguish the life in him like a candle buried under an avalanche, could keep Kid French tongue-tied for more than those first few moments of shock. A slow second passed, another and another, and still the rifle had not added its voice to Hawk's. The Kid bestirred himself. He had had ample time to think of his own weapon so conveniently handy to his lax hand and to realize that if he stirred a finger toward it that stirring of the finger would be his last act on earth. So, when he moved, it was to jerk both hands high above his head. He took his chance then. Yet he knew something of men and knew that there were those, fools as the Kid regarded them, who did not shoot a man whose hands were up.

"Me," he laughed nervously, his face all twisted to

one side, his eyes glassy, "me, I give up. L-like a lamb —you got me—"

"I've a notion," said Hawk, and the Kid shivered, "to kill you, whether you draw or not."

"That would be m-murder," grinned the Kid, his face all awry in a horrible grimace.

"Murder? To kill a dirty little rat? You nasty little beast!"

Kid French licked his lips and breathed a little deeper. No, a man didn't wait so long and then kill.

"Aw, go on," he managed. "I haven't touched the lady, if that's what you mean. I wasn't going to hurt her, anyway. I—"

"Shut up!" snapped Hawk, furious with himself no less than with the Kid; what he should have done was shot first and talked afterward. But as the other had guessed, he was no man to shoot another with his hands up.

La Güera, saving for one little inarticulate cry of gladness, had not spoken. She, no less than the Kid, had expected to see swift death dealt, and had been powerless to move or call out. Now, faint with horror, she scarcely more than whispered:

"Don't! Don't kill him—"

The Kid flicked his anxious eyes toward her and again licked his lips.

"That's it—that's a good—"

"La Güera Perrigo!" called Hawk sharply.

Even then she marked how again he named her La Güera Perrigo; he had done so just before he left. Why, it was because he did not want the Kid to know who she was—or that she knew who she was. And before —he had known that this other man was somewhere near by and would hear; that was why he had lifted his

voice so. And he had meant all the while to come back to her.

"Yes?" she answered, with a little start. "Yes? You want me to do something?"

"Take his gun away. Be careful! Keep as far away from him as you can; just reach out with your hand. If he moves the slightest bit in the world, jump back —and let me have him."

She shuddered violently but drove her rebelling muscles into obedience to his command. With thumb and finger-tips she removed the revolver from its loose holster. Then she backed away. The weapon, which she could scarcely force herself to touch, slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor.

"Kick it into a corner," said Hawk.

"Aw, I'll be good," said French.

"You'll step along into that far corner over by the door," Hawk barked out at him. "Keep your nose against the logs. I'm coming in."

"Come ahead, then," snarled the Kid, all of a sudden master of his evil being, fear of death gone, only a great shame and chagrin and bitterness making turmoil in the dark depths of his warped soul and those evil seeds germinating and flowering in poison buds of hate and bloodthirst. He began now to wish that he had taken his chance—shot it out—

Hawk crawled through the window, a rather awkward business, yet during it he kept a watchful eye upon Kid French's back and held himself ready to stop that young gentleman's career with a bullet at any instant.

"I wish to high heaven I knew just what to do with you," he muttered when once inside.

"There's nothing you can do, except turn me loose," blustered the Kid, surlily defiant at last. "And, take

it from me, you can't do it any too quick. And next time we meet up—" He grew vocally fulsome, his rank poison verbiage flowing in his characteristic noisome flow from spasm-twitching lips.

Hawk shouted him down in a blaze of anger.

"I can lay you cold with a rifle barrel over your skull," he rasped out, and the Kid fell silent.

For the first time now Hawk could spare a glance for the girl at his side. Terribly pale, she turned eyes on him which at the moment were like the eyes of a little child. At last, and to the uttermost, she trusted him, and him alone, in all the world of men as she knew them.

"If you hadn't come back to me!" she whispered.

"Buck up," he said gently. "It's been a little section out of hell for you, I know. But it couldn't be helped —and it's over now. I felt as you did that there was some one here, and the only thing seemed to be to let him think he had a free hand. I'm sorry."

"I might have known—"

"No. You couldn't tell. But now? I can't leave you alone here after this."

The very suggestion put fresh panic into her breast. She caught at his sleeve, her eyes pleading, her lips moving wordlessly. He patted her hand and spoke hurriedly.

"We'll have a little talk presently. With none of Blondino's hired hands listening in on us. Will you get your things—if you brought anything here with you? I'm stepping outside with what we caught to-night; will you join me in about ten minutes?"

Stopping only to take up the Kid's revolver and to make sure that there was no other weapon left behind, Hawk ushered his prisoner out into the moonlight. When La Güera came out a few minutes later neither

was in sight. She called anxiously, and Hawk's voice answered her from among the cottonwoods. She hurried forward and found him standing by two saddled horses —his own and the white horse. At first she did not see Kid French; then she noticed where he stood, his back to a young cottonwood.

"Our visitor has been kind enough to lend us his saddle and bridle," said Hawk coolly. "We'll not take his horse, as he has ridden the poor brute hard enough for one night."

She wondered why the Kid stood so still at his tree; coming on, closer to the horses, she made a wide arc about him.

"Oh, he'll stay where he is for a while," said Hawk. a certain grim satisfaction in his tone. "I won't say that he can't free himself, given time; a few hours' work can achieve wonders, even with a hard knot in a half-inch rope! Ready?"

He helped her up into his own saddle, giving her a smoothly gaited mount, and himself went up to the white horse's back. And all this while there had been not so much as a single mutter from the man they were leaving behind. At first she thought that he must be gagged, but the moonlight fell on his head through a network of leaves, and she saw that his unhidden mouth was clamped shut. She shivered, and was all eagerness to be gone. She did not like to think of the two men alone out here—of Hawk finding the way to shut that venomous mouth so effectually. They rode off through the trees and never a word came from the Kid to follow them.

"Is there any danger—of him dying there?" she asked, the horror of the situation heavy on her. She knew what it was to be alone here, and how terrors had gathered

about her; to be alone and bound thus was, to her, a terrible thing.

"None. The night isn't promising to be pleasant for him, but he'll not freeze to death, and there are no wild animals here in the cottonwoods to gobble him up. And in time he'll work free."

"Where are we going? There is no place—"

"There are lots of places," he said cheerily. "The world is full of 'em. To-night, however, I'll admit we can't do much picking and choosing. I think the best thing is for you to come with me to the Blue Smokes."

Her grip tightened spasmodically on her reins, jerking her horse back.

"To the Blue Smokes! Where Victor Blondino is! Never; oh, never there, señor! First I'd run out into the desert, anywhere. I'd rather die out on the desert."

"I am going to do whatever you want, señorita," he told her gently. "I am here to-night simply to do what you want done. But think before you decide. Nacional invites, of course, but you would be in real danger there, as soon as Blondino learned where you were, and that would be as soon as he had talked with Kid French. Your greatest safety for the present, it seems to me, lies in riding on to the mountains. True, Blondino and some of his cut-throats are there, but so are other men; many other men. Close to a couple of hundred, in round numbers, and still more will be coming. Among so many I do not think that we need fear what Blondino will do. There are fair, square men there: Big Moments March, Bud Bell, Alec Farnsworth—scores of decent fellows. There, too, are old John Cobb who befriended you once; Danny, who remembers you down the years; their pardners, old Sam and Chancy Burns. They're men you can depend on. I can take you straight to them."

"But he will know! He will come in the night, he will break through them, and— Oh, señor, I am more afraid of him than of death itself!"

"Why should he harm you?" he asked curiously.

"He would carry me away with him, back down into Mexico! Farther south, even, farther below the border. He would find a priest to do his bidding, señor; some poor thing whom he'd terrify with a knife at his throat. He would force me to marry him— Oh, I tell you, I'd rather be dead!"

"And small wonder," he grunted. But he went on: "Do you know, do you guess, La Güera, why he is so determined to marry you? Is it just for love of you, La Güera?"

"Love?" she cried out scornfully. "Just for hate of me, rather! No it is for neither; it is to come at that which he sees the straightest way toward through marrying me. Since I have read all that Pedro Perrigo has written—"

"You have those papers safe, señorita?" he thought to demand sharply.

"Would I ever part with them? Oh, they are precious to me!"

"And you know now that you are Señor Castañares' heiress? That there are thousands of acres, some rich in mineral, which would in time come to you? That the government, deeming Señor Castañares unfit, have administered them, and so far kept them out of Blondino's clutch?"

"All that would seem to be true," she said wonderingly.

"And all that is needed is the proof that you are— who you are!"

She sighed at that, shaking her head.

"It can never be proven, I fear. Yet, what matter

so long as I know? I can make my poor father understand, and that will be all that matters."

"You dispose of large matters sweepingly," he laughed.

"But we'll see about that. What good would Blondino get out of marrying you if it were not for love, and he could not prove these matters? In time we shall know all this. By the way, was there any hint in Perrigo's statement as to where Blondino's stronghold might be?"

"His stronghold?" she repeated questioningly, and then shook her head.

"Never mind," he said, and returned to the other matter. "Now we must decide what you are to do. Where are you to go, if not to the Blue Smokes?"

"I know so little of all this fierce, savage country! Could I not just ride on north? On and on until at last I came to ranches and homes and people whom I'd not need to fear?"

"You'd ride a long, long way and across a lot of savage miles, and you'd come at last, if you lived through it, among strangers. And in time Blondino would follow. Won't you come with me, La Güera? Can't you trust yourself with me?"

Her eyes lifted steadily to his; again that look that was as of a little child came into them.

"But I do trust you!"

"Then, if that be true—"

"Yes, then I will go with you anywhere. Even where Blondino is!"

After that there was nothing more certain than that she was his responsibility. He said nothing, merely inclining his head. They rode on again with much to think upon and nothing which either cared just now to put into words. Once or twice the girl turned to look back. Here, at least, though fear had entered it had

been a haven. The Sentinel of the Desert, lifting its rocky pinnacle high among the stars, was like a sturdy old friend. The creek rippled murmuringly, playing with fallen moonlight, making merry little patterns of silver and jet. La Güera sighed as she turned away from all this. What a gentle corner of paradise this spot could be were it not for the ugly threads which ran through the warp and woof of humanity. In silence they rode through the pass and out upon the sands of the desert.

During these latter years the man had known many a danger and had come to regard with a strange, detached, cool judgment the risks among which he walked. Thus he neither belittled them nor yet magnified them. Now, accepting the girl's plight as his own responsibility, it seemed to him that they were taking the sane step. Rough men there were in the mountains, many of them. But, in the first place, their hearts and minds were set on gold, and gold in the fevered rush brooks no rival; second, a man may be pretty much of a savage and yet sink nowhere near the level of a Kid French in his attitude toward a woman. On top of these considerations, there was always safety in numbers. No two hundred men in the world, though more than one wolf ran in the pack, would pull down a girl like La Güera.

But he had thought it out beyond all this. She need not stay long in the Blue Smokes. And while she remained there—a day or two at most—Blondino need not suspect her presence. There was Chancy's wagon, there was Chancy himself, who appeared to have less interest in Dan'l's gold than in the profits he could make from the gold-seekers. He could be hired to drive elsewhere than Nacional! other men could be hired to ride alongside the wagon as an armed guard—knowing, perhaps not know-

ing, whom they convoyed. The wagon could even be started in the early night time, for excuse the dark cool instead of the heat of day—and none but Chancy need know—

Risk, perhaps. Yes, at all hours and anywhere, so long as Blondino lived and ran free, there would be some risk to her. But Hawk felt confident that all would run smoothly now. Blondino would know from Kid French that she had hid in the shadow of the Sentinel of the Desert; he would look anywhere on earth for her before thinking to look under his own nose.

With all this in mind, he was anxious to return to the Blue Smokes before daylight. Little time had been lost; one horse was fresh, and Hawk had spared the other, as a lover of horses always spares his mount when he can. With good luck the camp should be asleep when they drew near; in any case, there was little likelihood of any one noting particularly two mounted figures until they came very near—and he would take care that they did not come too near those whom he meant to keep in the dark.

Nor, weighing dangers, did he ignore brief speculation on the ease with which Kid French had tracked him to-night. It became clear that in Blondino's henchman he had to do with the ferret as well as with the jackal. The Kid it had been, he felt sure, who had crept out of camp to follow Dan'l to his gold, firing the premature signal shot; this sort of thing would appear to be congenial work for the Kid. Whether he had acted on orders from his chief or upon his own initiative mattered not; certain it was that he carried reports of all he knew. Well, it was good to know all this; good to remember that wherever Hawk went Blondino meant

to know. When stealth walked with brutality and force, the twain demanded respect.

Both Hawk and La Güera, in their long silence, had looked far backward and as far ahead as human sight might carry under such circumstances as bore upon them, and then yielded somewhat to the present moment. The desert, the desert moon and stars, weave their own magic, diminishing the figures which move through past and present, veiling them in vagueness and then wiping them off the slate. Peace stood out between the periods of stress. Beauty obliterated ugliness. A soft purity fell like a silvered, filmy mantle over the harsher aspect of the barrens. The whole world hereabouts became the argent-floored empire of dreamful quiet, a solitude to soothe. In its heart they were marooned. Its magic was to press the world back, to draw them together. Isolation in the final degree—that is the desert.

To come to the end of their ride was to complete a pleasant journey. But when at last the dark bulk of the Blue Smokes rose abruptly in their pathway their mood, become one for a little while, altered, and the peaceful quiet was drained out of it. The moon had set and the dark filled the passes along the ragged hills, while peak and spire and rugged shaft of riven rock stood naked and gaunt against the stars. From afar they heard intermittent voices; now and then a flare of light made its glow through the night. Sleep had had little to do with the men gathered here.

Hawk did not lead her into Dan'l's Glade, but, turning to the side when among the first bowlder-strewn slopes, keeping a major ridge between them and the general encampment, struck into a defile sufficiently remote for what he had in mind. He could know nothing of conditions existing here now; even a few hours make

things over when men are at fever heat and largely unrestrained. He meant to convoy her to a place of temporary safety, then to reconnoiter, going first of all for a word or two with Big Moments March.

So now, riding single file because of necessity, shut in on either side by sheer cliffs, sound of voices and flare of lights lost to them as though none such existed, with only the glimmer of the stars to light the way, they pressed farther into the wilderness of upthrust rock and deep-gouged cañon which constituted the Blue Smokes. In a little level place of which she could make nothing, so gloom-infested was it, but which he remembered well, he dismounted and gave her a hand to dismount. Here they left the horses, and went forward on foot. The way steepened and narrowed; they heard but could not see a creek slithering over smooth-worn waterways. Then almost immediately they stepped into the place which he had chosen for her.

It was a tiny level spot with a beetling wall of rock standing at the back and frowning over it like the wall of a fortress, a place where a dozen piñons grew, softly fragrant with wisps of sweet air rising from the tenderer growths down by the creek.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he promised her. "Half an hour at the most. Here, I'll leave my rifle with you. You'll not need it, but remember that I'll hear a shot if you want me. And half an hour from now you're going to have friends thick around you and be as safe as the national treasure in the national vault."

She sank down at the base of a pine, the rifle at her side. After the night's adventure and the long ride she wanted only to drop down and rest. She, too, felt that at last she was safe; too wearied out, perhaps, to fear greatly.

And so he left her, going hastily back to the horses and, with them, returning to Dan'l's Glade. Once more he saw gleams of fires and again heard voices. As he came closer he made out that those fires were where the crowd, in the first wild rush, had staked claims on what they supposed to be Dan'l's site. He tied his horses among the willows near Chancy Burns's wagon and went up the low-lying ridge separating the false location from the true. Ahead of him, where the second and smaller encampment should be, were only silence and darkness.

CHAPTER XXIII

CONFERENCE UNDER THE PINES

PICKING a cautious way along through the dark, wondering at the hush which deepened as he went forward, Hawk was brought to a sudden alert stand-still by a voice. Some one, whom at first he could not see, spoke curtly, challenging him:

"Who are you? What are you looking for?"

No mistaking Bud Bell's unhurrying speech. The man himself stood with his back to a big rock, not to be seen even dimly until Hawk was within a couple of yards of him.

"I want a word with March. What's happened during the night?"

"So it's Hawk come back?" said Bell, and added, a thought suspiciously: "Where've you been?"

"Attending to my own business," Hawk told him, not liking the tone of voice, and added: "Where's Big Moments March?"

The cowboy took his time to select an answer. Hawk's absence during the night had caused comment, more or less idle; in Bud Bell it had awakened speculation. In his mind an explanation was required when any man took it upon himself to vanish just as his fellows were staking claims to potential gold-mines. Building on a substratum of suspicion, a man may rear lofty edifices in brief time. To Bud Bell, once the suggestion had presented itself, there was nothing any more likely than an underhand agreement between Julian Hawk and Jake Blondine.

For if one were Captain Colorado and the other that border bandit, Blondino, what more to be expected than that two such captains of outlawry should make common cause at a time like this? Once establish a fixed idea, no matter how false, and many things point to its being correct; false theories have never lacked for bolstering evidence.

Now, however, he was but one of several whose appointed duty was to keep awake and watchful, advising their friends of any untoward happening, and no part of his task or of common sense to precipitate any private or general quarrel. So for an answer he selected an impersonal one.

"March, I guess, is getting a cat nap. A good many of the boys are. Straight ahead, about a hundred yards, and you'll be stumbling into camp."

"Thanks," said Hawk, and went on.

He had no thought to awaken the camp; he knew that though March and some of the old-timers might be calm-blooded enough to have their sleeps, the majority of the small party would be wide awake, thrilling to the present and variously expectant of the morrow. They would be in a knot or in several groups together, and would be talking of what had happened and making no end of prognostications for the future. So, while going on, he listened intently for the sound of voices.

Sure enough, he was drawn presently to three men talking in undertones. They grew silent at hearing his oncoming tread; the air about bristled with some sort of expectancy. Not knowing who they were, it being altogether too dark for that, he asked of them if any knew where March was. And one of them, a quick, nervous, and patently excitable little fellow, one of the sort who knows everything, if you'll hear him tell it, and can never

get himself launched upon the telling fast enough, pointed out the way. Yonder was a whitish, spectral something, dimly discernible—an old, weathered snag of a dead tree. At its base he would find Big Moments March, rolled in a square of canvas, sleeping like a log.

"Something pretty important?" queried the little man, who, like his kind, having fired his shot, was already snatching for fresh ammunition.

Hawk went on, disregarding other men among whom he passed, coming straight to the spot indicated. He had promised La Güera not to keep her waiting long; let March get his sleep some other time. He bent over the quiet form, calling softly:

"Mr. March—it's Hawk for a—"

What chanced next can be indicated no more fittingly than, like Mr. Wegg, by dropping into poetry. The bard of martial melodies hath it:

> "At once there rose so wild a yell,
> Within that dark and narrow dell,
> As all the fiends, from heaven that fell,
> Had peal'd the banner cry of hell."

A shrill and blood-curdling yell it was, startling Hawk half out of his wits. A tall, ghostly form, hampered by the folds of canvas, surged upward, clawing at the air; silence of a moment ago was torn to shreds, lashed through and through by such unholy imprecations as were like streaks of sulphurous flame. The sleeper, awakening so violently, from clawing at the air, shrieking orders all the while for his "trusty rifle," threw both arms about Hawk's neck and, in the suddenness of his attack, bore him off his feet so that the two crashed to the ground.

On an instant the whole camp was in an uproar.

Startled brains function swiftly if not unerringly. A score of men asked, "What is it?" and some few, knowing no more than their brothers, hazarded their own explanations. It was thought that some prowling murderer had sneaked into camp and plunged a knife into a sleeper.

High above the tumult rose the wild voice of old Sam. He was neither awake nor asleep, caught, rather, in that weird borderland between the two, contending no more with the form he had gripped so fiercely than with the horde of visions trooping through his primitive dreams. "Injuns!" they marveled to catch out of his bellowings; and then John Cobb and Dan'l came running forward, elbowing a way and trying to make their explanations above the hubbub.

Such was old Sam's frenzy, such the wholly spasmodic and novel method of his attack, Hawk was hard put to it for a moment to save himself without doing murder. But in the end he got old Sam down on his back and knelt on his chest and tried to pour a little cool reason into a hot and seething brain. But before he could even begin to make any headway, with old Sam still in the grip of his nightmare, the crowd bore down on them. The suspicion of some miscreant running amuck in camp found nothing here to contradict it; rather, in the two struggling forms, men saw confirmation of the fear that a sleeper was being knifed. In another moment Hawk was jerked away from the old man and hurled backward, a dozen men rough-handling him; while still others ran to the twitching figure to learn if he were dead. Old Sam lifted his howling voice, and, though he made amply clear that the life was whole and unharmed within him, he only created further mystification by his announcement:

"There's nine of 'em! Looky there! Scalp-snatching

Injuns, blood dripping from neck to heel! I ripped three-four wide open. Whoop-eee!—"

Perhaps it was quite as well that both John Cobb and Dan'l were at hand and quick of wit. They got old Sam quiet without any trouble, knowing the trick of it; a sharp slap in the face and a curt word or two to follow stilled his clamor. Some one brought a torch, and in its light he blinked owlishly, then grinned a thought sheepishly. And then, with an extremely silly sort of tittering noise, he proclaimed, "Come pret' near getting him, I did, only couldn't lay hand on my gun in the dark," and then went back to his canvas.

Old Sam's behavior thus regulated, the two partners elbowed a way into the press about Hawk, explaining on every hand how the old fool was just dreaming—nothing new with old Sam. And as the men understood and liberated Hawk, a roar of laughter went up.

"I was looking for Tom March," Hawk explained stiffly. "Some inspired jackass told me he was asleep here, and I stumbled into this old rattlesnake."

March, who with others had been awakened, came forward.

"That you, Hawk? Want me?"

"Yes. And Danny too, since he's here. John Cobb too, I guess, to add his share to what I want to tell you."

"Come ahead," said March. "We'll have to get out of this hubbub to hear ourselves yell. You boys," he added with a sudden chuckle as they strode along "ought to chain old Sam up every night and hide his gun."

"Oh, he was just dreaming," said Dan'l, as though that made everything all right.

Drawn somewhat apart from the camp site, they came to a stop and looked curiously to Hawk for what he might have to say. They, as well as Bud Bell, had found time

during the night to dwell upon his absence at a time like this. Hawk kept them wondering no longer. As briefly as clarity permitted, he put them into possession of the salient facts pertaining to La Güera's present predicament.

"It's all of a piece!" exclaimed John Cobb angrily. "She was scared of her life when those roughnecks of Blondino's overtook us the other night out in the desert; scared, too, poor kid, when we spotted a lone horseman, which turned out to be Hawk here—"

"Go slow, old timer," commanded March, checking him in full tide. "Shoot the works. All about her."

To what John Cobb knew, Dan'l added his own knowledge. From them March turned again to Julian Hawk.

"From what you boys know, from what, no doubt, the man Perrigo put down in black and white in his confession," he said thoughtfully, "it strikes me we ought to have this *hombre* Blondino just about where we want him?"

"No," said Hawk, sharp and emphatic. "Not yet. It's drawing in on him, so close he ought to feel it, but we haven't all the cards yet."

"What's lacking?" demanded March.

When Hawk hesitated with an answer, out of the dark came a dry crackle of curt words from Dan'l.

"You just set tight, Tom March, and watch a while. Me and Hawk, we're the ones. We talked it out and we know. You lend a hand with the girl; but you leave the main works to us."

Further than that, neither Hawk nor Dan'l would go, and at the end March had the uneasy feeling that trouble hovered in the air, but trouble which he could not gauge. He sensed a period of waiting—but for what? Of Dan'l's honesty of intentions he had not the slightest

doubt. Of Hawk he knew less. Instinctively he felt that the man was one who might be hard, but would prove to be no less just. Yet, as Bud Bell had insisted, it was Hawk who had saved Blondino's neck for him, and here again lifted his voice, saying: "Not yet. Blondino's time is not yet." A hard, just man only? Or something other and quite different—Captain Colorado—another Blondino, even—

"We'll go, the four of us, to Señorita Castañares." It was Hawk's voice cutting across his broken meditations. "She has been alone long enough."

It was a strange conference held in the dark under the pines, for all the while Tom March was trying to picture a girl from a soft, hushed voice, Dan'l was trying, having little in his memory to build on, to evoke the true vision of her, and she, on her part, listened to each man who spoke and found it hard to know which one it was. At the end it was Dan'l who came close to actually mothering her. There had been a queer little catch in her voice—and he had groped for her hand and squeezed it gently between his horny old palms, chirping out:

"Poor thing, don't you fret and don't you worry! You're as safe with us as in a church of a Sunday. And if that devil Blondino comes within looking-distance of you, I'll blow him all apart with two barrels of buckshot and lift my voice in praise o' the Lord for the chance."

Just what were they to do with her for the present? Hawk made a suggestion; they listened, meditated in silence, and were unanimous in agreeing. There was that largest of tent-house affairs in which they had met earlier in the evening; it was to be moved in the dark and pitched in a sheltered place close by Dan'l's strike. "Sheltered" meant a spot safe from scattering lead—if any should

grow reckless during the coming hours. That canvas shelter had been reserved by Chancy Burns and the other old men to become the camp store. It was to be announced that for the present at least it was to be considered the private property of the "pardners," a place to which they might withdraw at leisure for rest, sleep, or consultation; and that none was to disturb them there. In it La Güera would spend at least what was left of the night, with some one whom she could trust with her, with another of their party making sure that no one not wanted came upon her. To-morrow would be another day. And there were many men at hand who, when they knew a mere hint of her story, would be eager to stand among those who befriended her.

No difficulty offered itself. They moved and reared the flimsy affair of canvas-over-poles, spread a thick pad of blankets in a corner, hung for further privacy an auxiliary strip of canvas partitionwise across the little enclosed space, and left her trying to bespeak them her gratitude. Dan'l and John Cobb filled their pipes and established themselves comfortably on a couple of empty boxes at the door. Hawk, moving away with March, put to him the question he had addressed to Bud Bell a little earlier: What had happened during the night?

"Here, with us," answered March, "all has been orderly. With daylight each man will see clearly just how he stands with regard to Dan'l's claim, and each man will stand by his luck. Over there," and he nodded toward the glow of fire brightening the sky beyond the ridge, "I don't know just how matters have gone. We've not mingled with the crowd that sticks by its guns in that outfit. A gang of mad fools they were when you left us, and that's what they remained until they must have established some sort of a condition to suit them, or just

wearied themselves out with their racket. I'll admit I'm a bit impatient for daylight and an eyeful of whatever there is to see. By the way, it would seem that you don't give a hang yourself about the yellow stuff?"

Hawk laughed.

"I've got another man working for me," he said, rather queerly March thought.

"Meaning Blondino," added Hawk, and this time there was no laughter under the words. He turned abruptly and disappeared in the dark.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BIG BELLOWS THAT FANS ALL THE FIRES

NEVER a rarer morning even in this harsh land of glorious dawns and dusks, the day beginning with a tender light gushing out through the rose-stained windows of the east. As the tallest peaks caught the first flush, and before the rippling waves of light had run down into the lower lands, men were astir everywhere. Trust such a man-pack as this to mold the moment to its own image; to start up and bulk blackly against the pearly purity of the hour. The night had been feverish, the dawn was tainted with a hot restlessness.

While they were making fires, with a thought to breakfast, in the smaller camp a man made his way among them from the larger, more importunate crowd of gold-seekers. He was one of the younger men, only at the end of his 'teens, gawky and lanky, a jaw-dropped, lack-luster individual created to take orders from others. An errand boy, from the look of him.

"Better get the horses hitched up to the wagon," was what he had to say to any who would listen, his dull eyes traveling up and down with a vague interest. "Some of the boys got hurt las' night, an' they better be took somewhere where a doctor is."

His news created no surprise; surprising, instead, it would have been if no one had been hurt. Still, those who heard were interested and asked for details. The gawky youth almost brightened; he told of pick-handles wielded somewhat recklessly during the rush, of an alter-

cation or two, of wild shots fired. There were at least half a dozen victims of over-enthusiasm, three of them in what he judged might be pretty bad shape.

"What you fellers stickin' over here for?" he wondered.

Some laughed; others merely glanced at one another and unconsciously tightened their muscles and mental fiber, while all had ample time to realize that an explanation and a show-down were not to be much longer postponed.

"Who told you to come over here asking for a wagon?" asked Dan'l. "You didn't think that all up yourself, sonny?"

"We had a sort of meetin'. Then—"

"Who sent you over, sonny?"

"Well," came the grudging answer, since the lanky youth would have been willing to have it supposed that he was man enough to have come on his own initiative, "it was Jake Blondine. He says—"

"Ne' mind," snapped Dan'l. Frying-pan in hand, he returned to his fire. He knew now what he had suspected. Blondino had tightened his grip during the hours of stress; it was he who gave orders.

"What'll I go tell him about the wagon?" was demanded of all in general. And when no one in particular took it on himself to answer, a former question was repeated: "What you boys doin' over here, anyway?"

"Going to start a ranch to raise young eagles," he was told by an old desert rat busy frying bacon, and went off vaguely—only vaguely—puzzled. Beyond vagueness, even toward bewilderment, it was not his habit to go.

During the breakfast hours several other men, keener-eyed and shrewder-witted, came into camp. They saw orderliness and method here, and no sign of what they had expected—namely, disgruntled dissatisfaction. Par-

ticularly did they look to see how Dan'l took his loss, and his inscrutable old eyes told them never a thing. He sat on a rock, his pipe between silent lips, his old gun across his knees, and seemed lost in mild day-dreaming. Perhaps there was a hint of a twinkle in the old eyes—one could not tell. Yet here was Dan'l, unruffled certainly, and here were his partners, all as cheerful as crickets; here, too, was Big Moments March, looking very grave, yet in no way suggesting that he had been elbowed out of his golden path; here was the man, Hawk, of whom much had been said, and who gave no hint of the savage spirit, held in check and ready to explode, which they had expected. They saw Bud Bell sitting on a log and serenely occupied with whittling and soft, monotonous whistling.

"Might be," suggested one, "that the old man made a strike over here, too?"

No one was in any haste to enter into explanations. To do so smacked somewhat of lighting a short fuse bedded in dynamite. Little by little suspicions would awake; let the truth dawn gradually. Let men a few at the time, not in a grand rush like last night's, shift their places from where they were now to where they would elect to stand when they grasped the situation.

Chancy Burns announced that he would be hitching up and starting for Nacional immediately and would take all the joy in life in hauling that far as many of the sick and dying as cared to climb aboard. He announced farther that a certain Blondino owed him sixteen hundred dollars for a barrel of prime licker, and that he, Chancy Burns, could use the money most handily. There were those who jeered at him and named him fool, but Chancy shook his head stubbornly, as set and determined

as a miner's burro, and said he meant to have what was his own.

Then he drove away, carrying two men on blankets in the bed of the wagon, one dangerously hurt with a bullet through his groin, one swearing all the way from the pain of an arm broken by a pick handle.

The high-grade specimens which Dan'l had bethought him to scatter at the false location last night were pounced upon by eager prospectors during the first tour of the full day. Shouts went up, men bunched up here and there, demanding to see, to handle the precious bits. A new wave of excitement ran through them—and broke in dying bubbles. For among them were some few who knew something of gold and its ways; and inevitably the specimens drifted under their keen eyes. High-grade, yes—but broken off a ledge somewhere. Where was the ledge? Anywhere in the world, they were quick to see, excepting right here among them. Here was a wilderness of rubble of as uninviting an order as their old boots had ever stumbled over.

"Funny about Dan'l givin' up so easy like," was said more than once.

All had located claims hit-and-miss fashion in the dark, only striving to crowd in as close as possible to that spot on the ridge where it had been first announced Dan'l was about to drive his stakes. Hence as it grew light it became apparent that there were a hundred debatable points, and with them as many causes of argument, which is to say, strife. But now they were slow about indulging in violence of speech or act. A buzz ran through them as through an agitated hive of bees. All was not right —"there was a nigger in the woodpile."

In as short a time as this it had become habit with

the majority of them to look to Blondino. There he stood, a commanding figure, not a yard from the spot whence their first rush had whirled Dan'l and his friends into a short-lived oblivion. Hands on hips, legs astraddle, his eyes bright and hard, he stared over their heads across the glade toward the smaller camp. News had dribbled in to him here; he had seen the bits of gold-bearing rock running from hand to hand; he had been the quickest of all to suspect something amiss. Even last night, when in the hurly-burly, gun in hand, he had hoped to come upon Hawk, and when he had assured himself that Hawk, along with the old men, took no interest here, he had felt uneasy.

Of a sudden he burst into noisy laughter, and thus drew to himself the wondering eyes of all about him.

"Who'll buy me out?" shouted Blondino, strong white teeth glistening in the wideness of his grin. "I'm of a mind to sell cheap this morning! Say six bits—say a pack of cigarettes! Who'll be the lucky gent to fall heir to Jake Blondine's slice of this big bonanza?"

A man close by, just making his morning cigarette, tossed forward his bag of Durham, and Blondino caught it in his broad palm.

"Sold!" he cried, and more than ever did they wonder at him, who seemed so inexplicably jocose. "She's yours, Hook Nose."

"Have you gone crazy?" he was asked on all sides.

"I might be crazier'n some, and yet not as crazy as others," he gave them for ready answer. "There are times when an idea can get into my head without being driven in with a sledge-hammer. It's my notion, gents, that we've been done. Good and proper, nice and brown."

He leaped down from a rock on which he had been

standing and strode down the hillside. They watched him go down into the glade and up on the farther side, and knew where he was headed. The human hive buzzed again; not a man but wanted to follow him, yet there were many who still hoped on, and were fastened to their claims as though held by chains. In the end a goodly number—a score or more—ran after him.

"Here comes the Big Bellows that fans all the fires," remarked Bud Bell as Blondino with his straggling following came into sight. "He's walking on his heels, too, if you ask me."

There was no truculence in Blondino's expression or speech. He seemed the embodiment of good humor as he came to a halt, looking about interestedly. His eyes and Hawk's clashed and Blondino's roved on to linger briefly with Dan'l, to visit in turn John Cobb and old Sam, finally to traffic with March's eyes.

"The boys are beginning to think," said Blondino coolly, "that you played a joke on them. How about it, March?"

"I wouldn't put it quite in that light," rejoined March, curt and in nowise pleased to have Blondino putting himself forward again.

"No? You wouldn't put it that way? Maybe you don't mind saying, then, how you would put it?"

"Ask your question, if you want an answer," said March.

"You can't guess what it's going to be?" laughed Blondino, still unruffled so far as externals went to show. "Question is: Did you boys trick the rest into locating in the wrong place?"

"No," said March. "We tricked no one."

Again Blondino laughed. He had worded his question the way he wanted to word it, and knew that his inter-

pretation of the situation had registered upon those who, trooping after him, had heard.

"Let's put it this way," he continued pleasantly, "is there any gold where the boys have located, over on the ridge there? Or is all the gold you know of, Dan'l's gold, right here? Where you gents are sitting snug and pretty?"

"So far as I know," March told him, glad to have the thing over with, "there's no gold over yonder where you and a lot of other fools rushed Dan'l and his pardners off their feet."

"'Fools' is the right word," agreed Blondino, nodding and grinning. "The boys never looked for any double play, and consequently you might name 'em fools; that's right, March. It's just beginning to dawn on them, how Dan'l led them off the wrong way, fired off his signal gun the wrong place, and then sneaked around here, giving his friends the inside track. Pretty slick, too!"

March was trying to measure the man anew. That vast good humor was, of course, all pretense. He glimpsed the fact that never was Blondino more dangerous than when he carried himself thus; his hard, bright laughter now recalled that other outburst so few hours ago when he stood with his hands bound and a rope's shadow across his bare throat.

"Dan'l didn't fire any gun at all," spoke up March sternly. "Some one followed and fired when he thought that Dan'l had reached the spot. It is thought among us that the man who did pull the trigger that started the stampede was your man—Kid French."

"Quit your joshing!" cried Blondino, still all outward good humor. "Old Dan'l has a high reputation for being a wise old fox; don't deprive him of the glory of about the cutest trick I ever saw pulled on a flock of pretty

wide-awake *hombres*." He swung about to the men who had followed him and who stood staring and frowning and muttering, never a man of them all disposed toward Blondino's urbanity. "You see how it is, *amigos*," he exclaimed, with just the hint of a sneer, no more than a hint. "Big Moments March, who never fails to buy in when there's a strike, has come to an understanding with Dan'l. It's a close corporation; guess we all might as well go home, huh? The cat's already got the cream."

It would appear, then, that he had lost all interest. Without awaiting a word, he turned and went down into the glade. Half a dozen men followed him; those were the men who had ridden with him from Nacional. They went to their horses and began saddling.

"Too good to be true," grunted Tom March angrily. "Watch that devil; he's deep as a well and as muddy at the bottom."

Before Blondino, most leisurely in every movement, had done saddling, other men had begun trickling down into the glade from the ridge, which no longer held them as it had through the night. They asked sharp questions and got short, nonchalant answers.

"We're stung," he said a score of times, always as though it made little difference. "Why not admit it? Just an old-fashioned frame-up—and we fell for it. Like so many sheep. It's their time to laugh, and they're laughing, good and hearty. Tom March says he's bought in with the old men. They've got enough men—about thirty altogether—to hold the pick of the land. March is paying 'em wages, that's about the lay of it. Hot chance, anyway, for a bunch of us boys, wage-earners, stacking up against a multi-millionaire! When Big Moments March names us a flock of jackasses, I guess he picks the right name."

Not all this to any one man; fragments thrown at this, that, and the other of them. He did not harangue them into rebellion; he stung them with indifferent suggestions. No man would say, now or later, that Jake Blondine had anything to do with starting any trouble which might come later on. When they began now to grumble, he laughed. When they cried out that here was a crooked deal, he laughed louder. Suppose it was crooked? What to do about it?

"Lie down like good dogs," he advised them, and even then a man could scarcely be sure if he sneered or not. "Good dogs lie down when they are whipped. You can always remember, and talk about it, that you came for once as close as next door to your millions. Picture stuff, that rock which Dan'l scattered on the ridge for us. Guess that's all we get. Souvenirs. The lucky ones are the ones who kicked in with Big Moments. Let's go home, boys."

Over and over that suggestion. Yet he did not go.

There was one idea which he voiced a score of times:

"It always goes like that. It's the few that get the inside, where the cream's richest; it's the mob that gets the leavings. About thirty of them—close to two hundred of us. They're in; we're out."

About thirty of them. Close to two hundred of us.

At last he was up in the saddle. The only mounted man in a steadily swelling crowd, he gained a fresh emphasis. He changed his words slightly to repeat his thought:

"About seven of us to every single man of them—and we're done! Well, let's take our licking the easiest way. Who wants to be a millionaire, anyway? We can always go back to the farm!"

"Quitter!" shouted a raucous voice.

Blondino only grinned and nodded.

"Right, little man. Quitters, the whole two hundred of us. But since that's what we are we might as well say so."

He snatched off his hat, waved widely, and rode away. But not far. He just recalled—or appeared to remember—the fifty-gallon barrel. It was where he himself had seen to its placement last night, in the willow thicket. He reined in to it and dismounted.

"It's a long, hot ride, and our throats will be dry with laughing," he called out. "Who's having a drink? It's on Jake Blondine."

Around the whisky barrel time passed swiftly. Always about to ride, Blondino allowed himself to be detained by any man who had a remark to make. Remarks were plentiful. "All we ever asked was fair play." There was some truth in that. They had stood back last night, letting the partners go first to stake their claims. Then the old men had tricked them. No truth at all there, in the beginning, but it was easy to see trickery now at the end. But was it the end?

The fair thing would be for the whole crowd to draw lots. Or to toe a line and make a general dash for it. As they had done last night. That went for everybody. Even the old men; they had lost their chance by their crooked work.

"Yoi, yoi!" laughed Blondino. "Won't the lucky thirty cheer when you spring that on 'em! Watch Big Moments March throw his hat up in the air. You'll make me die laughing yet."

Now and then, but only infrequently, some man broke away and went to join the smaller camp. Through a natural quirk of psychology, inspired in the first place by Blondino, each man was followed by jeers and went

like a deserter. "If you want to lick up the other fellows' leavings, Willie, hop along."

As time passed there were some few newcomers, stragglers only now making their way into the Blue Smokes. They were told how matters stood.

"The old men were to stake their claims last night in the dark. Everybody agreed. They were to shoot a gun off when they were ready. They led the way to the wrong place, fired the gun, and sneaked off. We're holding the sack. They, with their clique, have hogged the whole works."

"We got a right to call for a new deal. We got a right to call for a parley. We got a right—"

Just then some one came elbowing through the crowd, some one haggard, wolf-eyed. Here, his hot brain bubbling with its own poison, came Kid French.

CHAPTER XXV

CAPTAIN COLORADO TAKES A LONG CHANCE

"KNOW a man named Parmalee?" Hawk asked of Tom March.

It was the first hour of the true dark. It had been a day of much muttering and little doing. Men who had claims of golden promise stuck by them and amongst themselves asked many questions which had so many and so various answers that it was as though they went unanswered altogether. The larger number of the men came and went restlessly, making the long hours of the afternoon uncertain and only vaguely ominous. Blondino, always about to ride, never left camp. If he meant mischief, he went about it in a curious way, laughing, jesting, naming himself a fool along with the rest of the fools. Where he went, there also went his shadow, Kid French; but the Kid showed no flicker of good humor. He was but one of many whose grumblings rose louder and louder. No matter what wild things he or the other grumblers said, Blondino only laughed.

Now, Hawk and Tom March stood together, some few paces removed from the nucleus of their camp, and near them was a little group composed of Bud Bell and four or five of his cowboy companions. They were looking toward the rousing bonfire, about which the larger, restless element stirred and seethed. In answer to Hawk's abrupt question, March said that he did know Parmalee. There were two of that name.

"There's the little bow-legged chap. Not a bad sort.

Then there's the bigger chap, a man of your size and build—"

"That's the one I mean," Hawk told him.

"That's Flick Parmalee," said March. He leaned closer, as though in the dark he would make out Hawk's expression, then concluded dryly: "He's absolutely no good, Hawk. As crooked as a dog's hind leg; he'd double-cross his own mother for the price of a drink."

"I've had him on my pay-roll all afternoon," Hawk returned. "You need a crooked tool sometimes, you know, to work in crooked places. Maybe you've noticed him, plying back and forth?"

"And I'm not the only one who's noticed," grunted March. "I'm glad you've mentioned it. Bud Bell called my attention to the two of you with your heads together. He knows Parmalee for what he is, and—"

Hawk's short laugh cut him short.

"I know. But Bell's got me down for a general all-round yellow dog. Can't blame him particularly; his brother Charlie has suffered about all a man can go through with, and holds me responsible."

Voices where Bud Bell and his friends stood had fallen suddenly silent. Hawk twitched March by the sleeve.

"Step over here a bit with me," he invited. "I want to talk with you alone. And," he added, as they moved away from the heart of the camp, "I want you to hear what Parmalee has to say this trip. It's time for him to be coming in."

They did not go far, only to the lone pine tree not above a hundred feet away.

"You think you know what's in the wind?" asked March.

"There are all sorts of men down yonder," Hawk observed thoughtfully. "More good fellows, take 'em at

their normal, than the other kind. And that's why nothing at all has happened so far. But—there is more than a sprinkling of good-for-nothings—and there's Blondino. Not to mention Kid French and the rest of Blondino's pack."

"But, from all reports, Blondino is keeping his shirt on—"

"It'll be a red shirt when he starts waving it," grunted Hawk. "We'll have Parmalee with us any minute now, and he'll tell us the latest. As I line it up now, Blondino's getting ready to stampede us in the dark. He's too foxy to say to a crowd with so many decent boys in it that the thing to do is clean up on us, roughshod; he's wise enough to know that a mild fracas—I mean a fracas that *starts* mild—would find many to shove it along and never a man to lift a hand to stop it. What if that mob simply wanders into our camp—*laughing?* What if they just make a joke of it all, shoving and jostling and joshing, with never a gun drawn or a pick-handle flourished? Why, we'd be thrown into the wildest sort of disorder; we'd be crowded right and left; there'd be nothing to show, come daylight, where a single man of us all had staked him a claim. And then, in the first glint of light, there'd be another rush, every man for himself, everything wide, free, and lovely."

"With Blondino, who's laughed all day, laughing all night!"

"With Blondino doing nothing of the sort, if I know him," snapped Hawk. "What I said was that the mêlée would start that way. Trust Blondino from the side lines to start shooting—to start his men at the same dirty game. Then what? The little party of last night would be nowhere at all compared to what would happen."

"And that's what you look for?"

"I know we fooled him last night; I know he's not as happy over it as he'd have the world think. If a cold-blooded devil ever walked, he's the gent. And—here comes Parmalee, I think."

A tall form loomed up through the dark. It was Parmalee; he was muttering under his breath.

"All right; come ahead," Hawk called out sharply.

Parmalee did not see Hawk, who was standing with his back to the tree. He did see March, however; mistook him for the man he expected to meet here, and came on to him, exclaiming:

"I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Hawk. There's going to be hell—"

Poor Parmalee stopped there. Stopped for all time. A flash and an explosion broke through the black curtain of the dark but a few feet away, and Parmalee sagged and wilted, a bullet through his brain. There was the second shot, so close to the first that it was scarcely to be distinguished as a separate explosion, and Tom March was falling before Parmalee struck the ground. He plunged sideways, trying to save himself, and crashed into Hawk just as Hawk's revolver came flashing out of its holster. The weapon was knocked out of his fingers just hardening to the grip, and Hawk dropped to his knees, seeking it wildly.

It took but a moment to recover it, but it was a moment in which much had happened, and he held his fire. Where the man had stood who had fired those two deadly shots there were now several men, men contending fiercely, striking savage blows, and there was a most inexplicable confusion of voices. For certainly one voice was the voice of Bud Bell, shouting out triumphantly: "That's the stuff, boys! Down with 'em." And, just

as certainly, another voice booming out mightily was the voice of Victor Blondino, trumpeting: "Here he is! I got him! It's the Kid trying to kill Hawk!"

Confused, bewildered, Hawk stood where he was. What was Bud Bell doing there? He should be in camp, where surely he had been ten minutes or less ago! Where had Blondino come from, and what did such words mean from him? "I got him! It's the Kid trying to kill Hawk!" As if Blondino would stop the Kid from killing Hawk or any other man here to-night. Hawk of all men!

Sounds of struggle ended as abruptly as they had begun. Only a single voice pierced the sudden down-dropping silence, Kid French, in a shrieking frenzy of rage, naming Blondino every name in the calendar of the damned. Then there was the sound of a blow, and even Kid French was stilled.

"Two men to each man of 'em," Bud Bell was commanding, his own tones fluting with rage. "Into camp with 'em, and we'll have a look at 'em. Hey, Curly; jab a six-gun between Blondine's shoulder-blades, and let him have it if he gives you a half excuse. Monte, do the same for the Kid."

He himself came running then, calling out to March, asking if he were much hurt. He stumbled over Parmalee's prone body and fell to his hands and knees. His boot struck another fallen man; a moan came from Tom March.

"That you, March?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," March hardly more than whispered. "Got it good, Bud. See if they killed Hawk—"

"Here I am," said Hawk quickly. "No, didn't touch me. Parmalee's down, though."

"Damn Parmalee!" shrilled Bud Bell. "And damn

you, Colorado Hawk. This is your doing, and I happen to know it."

He was on his feet again; Hawk sensed rather than saw the weapon in his hand.

"Go slow, Bell," he said coolly. "Enough damage is done for a spell. Help me here with March."

Men from the camp near by were calling out to know what was up. As yet none had come forward; it might be a general attack for aught they knew, and there was small sense in rushing forward to meet the utterly unknown when a few moments would explain. But now, as Hawk and Bell joined in calling to them, a number came running.

"It's been a dirty ambush," Bud Bell was telling everybody. "This man Hawk and Flick Parmalee framed it; Jake Blondine and Kid French did the actual shooting. Guess they made a mistake, mowing Parmalee down. They were out for Tom March—"

Excitable spirits flared up, and there was a great deal of clamoring and jostling. Calmer men, Alec Farnsworth prominent among them, made a stern, imperative demand for slow going. It was Farnsworth who clapped a hand on Bell's shoulder, bidding him curtly to hold his horses.

"They're runnin' away with you for once, Bud-boy," he added, as Bud fell silent. "Anything you've got on your chest will keep. Let's see first how bad March is hurt."

They bore him in the center of a finally hushed crowd to the only shelter in camp. Gently they lowered him to a blanket and lighted candles.

"He's dead," said Bud Bell heavily. "They got him, the ——!"

Hawk was down on his knees by March, cutting away

the clothing from his upper body. He jerked his head up to glare at Bud Bell and rasp out a harsh command.

"Somebody take the cowboy out and pour a bucket of water over him. And clear the tent here except for a couple of men. Get Blondino and the Kid out of the way, and better have 'em both hog-tied until we get this thing cleared up. Where's Danny?"

"Here I am, m' son," called Dan'l through the crowd. "Coming up."

"Any first-aid stuff you've got, Danny. And lend me a hand."

"Be back in two shakes," was the businesslike rejoinder, and Dan'l hurried away to ransack among the odds and ends of his camp outfit; forever knocking the skin off his hands, and frequently coming by graver wounds in his prospecting trips, Dan'l would as soon have thought of faring forth without a pick as without his little tin kit, in which there was always a supply of iodine and clean cloths and tape. He was back almost immediately, but in the meantime Alec Farnsworth had had his curt, calm words to say in Bud Bell's ears, and some of Hawk's commands had been carried out. Both Blondino and the Kid were escorted under heavy guard some steps away; the canvas shelter was emptied of the throng, only Hawk still kneeling over Tom March, Farnsworth standing by and two other men at the doorway.

"Know anything about handling a job like this, Hawk?" Farnsworth asked quietly.

Hawk nodded.

"Enough to do at a pinch, I guess," he returned. "But you'd better get one of the boys started out for the nearest doctor."

"Right you are," said Farnsworth, and turned to one of the men at the door. "Go out and tell Bud Bell,

Jim. He'll get one of his crowd on a good horse. Tell him Hawk says March has got a chance, but it's just as well not to waste any time."

"Here I am, Hawk," chirped Dan'l.

Hawk had the wound exposed, and an ugly wound it proved to be, high up in March's left chest. While Farnsworth held a candle close and Dan'l squatted with full hands at his side, Hawk cleansed the wound as best he could, freeing it of particles of cloth which had been forced into it, and doused it generously with iodine. March groaned, and at last opened his eyes; they went straight to Hawk's face, asking their question.

"Think you'll do yet, March," said Hawk encouragingly. "Drilled you pretty high up and wide of the heart; little more and it would only have broken a shoulder for you. We're going to make you comfortable and get the blood stopped. A man's already headed for a doctor. Think your lung's all right; anyway, we're going to guard against cold."

March blinked his eyes; that was easier than nodding.

"Thanks. I'll be all right," he said faintly.

A few minutes later, leaving the tent with Farnsworth, Hawk remarked thoughtfully:

"Generally a man can salvage some good out of a bad mess. I'd favor sending a man on the run to the other camp with word of what's happened. Tom March is mighty well liked, and this sort of thing isn't going to ride well with the crowd. That's one thing, and another is that we've got the head trouble-maker where we want him. There might have been a pretty fierce racket started to-night; now, with Parmalee dead and March seriously hurt—and with Blondino muzzled—I rather hope we're done with trouble."

"This ought to be a dash of ice water for all the half-

decent boys," agreed Farnsworth. "I'll step across myself with word of it."

Hawk turned away to where Bud Bell had called for a big pine fire. Here were Blondino and the Kid, each feeling the cold muzzle of a revolver in the small of his back. Each man had tried to get his explanation into words before the other, but at Bell's angry command to keep their mouths shut they had remained silent.

"Have they anything to say?" Hawk asked, and Bell, turning on him with the overflow of his pent-up savagery, snapped out:

"They're keeping still until I get ready to listen. You, too, Hawk. Got that?"

"Ah, I got it," he had for cool rejoinder. "And as for listening, I for one wouldn't mind hearing from you. When I stepped aside with March I left you here. How'd you happen to pop up over there—with Blondino?"

"I'll tell the whole crowd how that came about," cried Bud, standing back from sudden bright leaping flames. "I've watched you all day—"

"I know that. March knew it—"

"I've seen how you're thicker'n thieves with Flick Parmalee, as dirty a skunk as ever befouled any man's camp—"

"That I know, too. March and I were talking of it while we waited for Parmalee to come."

A ring of silent men had formed; their faces shone ruddy in the firelight, their eyes, turning swiftly from man to man, showed glistening whites.

"When I saw you pull March off alone into the dark, I thought it looked bad. Some of the boys thought so, too, and we slipped out to come around on the other side, meaning to be on hand no matter what broke.

We saw Parmalee coming; we saw these two yellow dogs follow, sneaking along behind. And, when one of the two started shooting, we were just about two jumps away from him."

"So that's it? Which one did the shooting?"

The ruddy faces, the glistening eyes turned toward Blondino and the Kid. And now, with the Kid rushing into raging speech, Blondino for the first time was content to stand silent—waiting his turn.

"It was this ——!" shrilled the Kid, never so foul of mouth as now. "Trying to put it on me, too, damn him! He'd heard there was a girl in camp—his girl. He wanted to make sure. He got me to come along, just the two of us poking around. That's what he told me, the —— All the time he meant to do for March and Hawk, here. He popped Parmalee over by mistake, that's all; dark, you know, and Parmalee about Hawk's build and Hawk's voice coming to us. He shot the two shots—then you boys jumped up and Blondine gets scared, and all of a sudden thinks he can put it on me. So he grabs me and starts yelling that I'm the man. Honest to God," he screamed, growing wilder in that heavy, threatening silence. "That's the God's truth!"

"Speak your little piece, Blondino," commanded Bud Bell.

Blondino took his time in speaking. He looked about him at face after face, and in the end spoke slowly and very calmly.

"Every word a lie," he said at last. "Forget he ever opened his nasty mouth. The two of us did come up together—following Parmalee. All day I've been telling the boys that the joke was on us, and to take it as a joke and let it go. All day I've noticed Parmalee going

back and forth. I had an idea he might be starting trouble—"

"You liar!" yelled the Kid, and made a sudden lunge toward him, forgetful for an instant of the steel pressed against his back. They jerked him back, and he grew still save for twisting, clenching hands.

"The Kid had a run-in with Hawk last night," went on Blondino quietly. "A row—over some girl. The Kid had sworn all day long he'd kill Hawk for it. That's why, when he shot, I yelled out that he was trying to kill Hawk. He got the wrong man, that's all. Maybe he realized that he'd blundered, dropping Parmalee, so blazed away again—and got Tom March. That's my little piece, gents," he concluded unemotionally.

A disgusted grunt broke from Bell.

"With two choice liars trying to save their necks, with nothing to prove anything except that both—"

"There's all the proof in the world," said Blondino. And there he stopped; if they wanted it, let them ask for it. He affected an utter indifference. And one could feel that that attitude of his began to make men uncertain. Even Bud Bell shifted nervously before he barked out:

"Proof? Put a name to it, man!"

"Did you ever stop to think," jeered Blondino, "that the man who did the shooting hasn't had a split second since then to reload?"

No, they hadn't stopped to think. There hadn't been time for thought with actions tumbling along in such high speed. But now a mere mention of this fact was enough, the implication clear.

"Who frisked Blondine of his gun?" demanded Bell sharply.

"I did," answered a voice. "Here it is."

The cowboy Curly stepped closer to the fire, a heavy revolver in his hand.

"Who took the Kid's gun?"

There was a brief silence. No one, it appeared, had touched the Kid's weapon; two or three men had run their hands over him; his holster had been empty—

That silence, the very briefest, was broken suddenly by a burst of wild clamor from Kid French himself. He saw what was coming—and he understood.

"The big stiff is framing me!" he shrieked. and again it took two men to hold him back from flying bare-handed at Blondino's throat. "When he grabbed me he jerked my gun away. It was in my hand somehow; it had just jumped out when he started shooting—"

Voices hooted him down. From the clamor at last rose Blondino's quiet speech:

"I knocked his gun out of his hand. Go back there where the scrimmage was and find it. With two shells empty," he concluded, and cocked his head aside to stare, jeering, at the Kid's distorted face.

They found the weapon without any trouble. There were two empty shells in it. The other revolver, the one which Curly swore he had taken from Blondino's belt, had not been fired.

Just then things looked pretty black for Kid French. No one was inclined to listen patiently to his hysterical explanations—no one, that is, except Julian Hawk. He knew his Blondino. He knew that it would not be like the Kid, moving along at Blondino's side and under his influence, to take upon himself any serious responsibility of this order—without explicit command from his master. He recalled the death of little Pedro Perrigo; there was another man whom Blondino used—and killed cold-

bloodedly when he became a menace. Would Blondino now hand Kid French over to the rope to save his own neck? Most certainly.

Both liars, both richly deserving such extermination as now threatened at least one of them—yet, in Hawk's ears, there had been a ring of sincerity in the Kid's outcries.

"That's my gun—the one Curly has!" the Kid was gasping. "Blondine, damn him, changed on me—"

Hawk had kept his own counsel during this rough-and-ready inquiry, but now spoke his mind.

"We've seen once already how in hot blood we could come pretty close to hanging a man for a murder which had never been committed by him or any one else. You've got these two men; hold on to them. But go slow, boys, about stringing either up. It's the devil of a next morning feeling when you find you've made a mistake."

There was some murmuring, yet in the end the great majority of men held with him. Let all possible investigation be made to-night; to-morrow, too. Something might turn up.

"For one thing," Hawk added, and thus clinched the matter, "it ought to be easy in the morning to have positive identification of those two guns. We'll get nothing further concerning them out of either the Kid or Blondino; but there will be men who'll step up and clear that little matter up."

He withdrew and looked up Dan'l. Here was the first opportunity to ask of La Güera; all that he knew of her was that he had not seen her, that she had not been in the tent when they carried March into it. Doubtless she had heard them coming; if she had heard Blondino's voice or even other voices calling out his name, she

would have been sure to slip outside before they arrived. Dan'l might know.

But Dan'l knew nothing of the matter, nor did either John Cobb or old Sam. They began seeking her in haste.

"She'll be right near, hiding in the dark," muttered Dan'l, and moved away to look for her.

Hawk, too, moved away in search of her. But at the same time he looked to see what disposal was being made of the two prisoners. He saw that they were separated, a couple of men escorting each one to a spot where he was to be kept under guard for the present. It had been Bud Bell's thought to keep them apart; with neither hearing what the other might have to add, there was an increased chance of getting at the truth.

Hawk hung on his heel, came to a dead stop. There was a certain something which he had in mind, which for a long, long while had been at the top of all his thoughts—and right now he fell to asking himself if circumstance had shaped up in such fashion that he could come at that thing. The Kid had spoken the truth; it had rung clear in his accusation. Blondino had killed Parmalee, had come very close to killing Tom March. And before long there would be men to swear that the revolver with two charges missing was Blondino's weapon—

He turned back slowly, walking quietly, stopping again in the outer ring of darkness centered with the fire. He heard Bud Bell's command, saw him moving away —going for a word, first of all, with Kid French. So Bud, too, knew that Blondino lied?

As Bud Bell withdrew, going to the Kid, Hawk came suddenly in close to the spot where two men, each with a gun in his hand, guarded Blondino. They looked up sharply as he approached.

"I've just thought of something," he said quietly, stopping close to them. "In the morning, Blondino, if not to-night, we'll be sure to scare up a man or two to tell us which of those guns is yours, which is the Kid's. Got that in mind?"

"Damn you!" said Blondino pleasantly.

"Got that in mind?" repeated Hawk. "Know what it will mean? *Then run for it!*"

The words rapped out like a pistol shot. And Blondino, though astounded, understood as he witnessed a most incredible thing. Hawk had leaped forward, striking the weapon from a cowboy's hand, hurling himself with fearful impact full against the other. Blondino stopped to ask no questions, but obeyed the curt command. Leaving three men rolling together on the ground, he vanished in the outer dark.

CHAPTER XXVI

SHALL A MAN TRUST HIS FRIEND?

THERE must come times in the life of every man with a tithe of the wild blood which had driven Julian Hawk many a year when impulse drives and will not be denied. A moment becomes a flash of light, an acme of endeavor—a reckless turning of the cup for the dice to roll free. Obstacles are ignored, the iron gauntlet slapped full in the face of fate. He comes to grips with this hour of his destiny, to rise victorious or to lie broken. Such occasions were what Tom March named the Big Moments.

He had freed Victor Blondino, knowing full well what he was about. He had counted in full confidence in succeeding in the first step. The next was a different matter, himself to go free. For two fighting cowboys were on him, tricked by him, man-handled by him, and in return praying to all the red-gods of their kind for such retaliation as he'd remember as long as he remembered anything. Yet, with the odds two to one, the first advantage lay with Hawk; he was prepared, they were utterly surprised.

He had knocked the revolver from one man's hand; it was lost among the stones in the dark. He bore the other man backward, warding off his gun arm, and the two crashed to the ground, battling like two old mountain cats. But Hawk's was still the advantage of the attacker, and while he had that advantage, and before the other man could seriously interpose, he broke free, lunged to his feet, and started his wild dash toward the

direction into which Blondino had vanished. A revolver cracked behind him, he heard the rush of a bullet, and for one tingling second thereafter he thought that he was accomplishing what he had set out to do. Free of pursuit, with the dark so thick about him—

And then he crashed headlong into none other than Bud Bell. Bell's lean, muscular arms and legs wrapped about him, and down went the two of them just as so short a time before Hawk had gone down with another man struggling with him. In savage, silent desperation he fought to go free, not even feeling the blows showered upon him as he himself lashed out wildly, trying to break Bell's grip, fending off his gun arm, seeking to beat him into insensibility. He rose to his knees, lifting Bud Bell up with him; he staggered to his feet, and the two men rocked up and down, back and forth, one as determined and implacable as the other.

But at last all odds were stacked against Hawk. A final surge of baffled fury engulfed him as a dozen men came pouring through the dark like an angry stream of bees; he went down under a thousand pounds of savagely energetic manhood. Even so, so fierce was the desire goading him, he hurled men right and left, he surged upward and took a lunging step, dragging men after him, he wrenched an arm free and struck a man down—and then sagged and went limp under the impact of a pistol barrel striking him full across the forehead.

Bud Bell, close to inarticulate whimpering rage, was trying to call for a rope, and having difficulty in sufficient coherence of speech to make himself understood. Blondino was gone, gone for good; some fools might go look for him, but they'd never see hide nor hair of him again. All day long he had had his horse saddled;

he'd have forked leather by now and be on his way. After killing Parmalee, after nearly killing Big Moments March—Blondino free, because of this yellow dog, Hawk!

"Go tie Kid French up!" he shouted as words cleared. "Tie him, hog-tie him, double tie him and sit on him! This here Hawk *hombre*, I'm going to sit a-straddle his wish-bone every minute of the time until he either swings off or sprouts wings. Who's got a rope?"

A rope came swishing through the crowd, and Hawk was tied hand and foot and offered never a single word in expostulation. For the moment he felt as though the heart were dead within him. He had staked so much —he had staked everything—on his mad play to free Blondino, and everything was lost. Blondino, a free man, laughing and riding, with his head up and the sweet night air blowing in his face, was free—and on his way! And Julian Hawk was on his back, hands tied, ankles lashed together until the rope cut the flesh. And this was a situation of Hawk's own making.

Bitterness welled up within him until it nearly choked him. If that fool Bud Bell, with an ancient insane grudge, were only a thought less free with his interference in other people's affairs; if only Bud Bell were in —China. There was no use calling to him, trying to explain to him; no slightest good to come of striving with a man like that, whose prejudices were set, whose mind made up.

"It was the big chance," muttered Hawk, in supreme disgust with himself and his fate. "The supreme chance —and I've muffed it."

Just then he heard a chirping old voice which of a sudden put heart back in him. Dan'l—Dan'l of the long, cool head; a man of weight here—an old friend. Here

came Dan'l—and hope is never dead. It faints, it swoons, but it does not die.

"Danny!" he gasped.

Some one had caught Dan'l by the arm, plucking him backward and to a standstill. Bud Bell; for ever and ever Bud Bell. Dan'l's cackling queries rose higher; he demanded to know what it was all about. And most emphatically he got his answer, brief as to words, full and complete as to meaning.

Dan'l stood where he was, rooted to his place.

"You mean—to tell me—he let Blondino go?" came at last from him wonderingly.

"Danny!" called Hawk.

Bud Bell told Dan'l that that was just exactly what he did mean. The old man, though he must have heard Hawk call the second time, did not stir and again was a long time silent. When at last he did open his mouth it was to mutter incredulously:

"It don't seem—reasonable!"

Bud Bell snorted angrily.

"You'll remember Hawk was the gent to save Blondine's neck the other night," he said sharply. "And tonight, first thing Blondine yells out is that he's trying to keep the Kid from shooting Hawk. For two gents who'd have the world think they wanted each other's gore that's a funny way to act, if you ask me."

Dan'l had a queer little, thin, eerie whistle for moments of great surprise. He emitted a slow, long-drawn-out whisper of sound now, and added to it a short grunt eloquent of disgust. Then he came hurrying forward until he stood over Hawk's head.

"You polecat!" rasped out old Dan'l, and drew a boot back as though he'd strike the defenseless man in the face. "You low-down, double-decking rodent, I've a

mind to bash your brains out! After all these years, you'd see Blondino in a hole and let him out? You'd make me think you were after his scalp, same as me —and then chip in with him, turn him loose! You—"

"Look here, Danny—"

"Shut your mouth!" shouted Dan'l, "else I jam my foot in it. Don't you ever open it again, long's you live, which maybe won't be much overnight, to spill my name out'n it! Hawk? *Buzzard!*"

"If you'd listen—"

"Bud Bell!" called Dan'l abruptly.

"Well?" retorted Bell.

"Do's I tell you. Me, I'm older'n you and a heap sight wiser, and never you forget it. Keep this man watched like you'd watch a million dollar diamond lying amidst thieves. Keep him and the Kid sep-rate, too. There's a couple of them little tents; set one man inside each, so he can't see what's going on, and set a guard a-top of each, and see that each one of 'em is tied so durned tight the rope cuts to the bone. I'm going to prowl about a bit, having a bright and shining idee; by morning, if you've got these two jaspers safe, I'm on record saying I can dig up a bit of sure thing evidence that'll swing the two of 'em—Hawk in particular. You do that, Bud Bell."

"Small fear," snapped Bell. "I'm the man who'll do just that."

Hawk simply lay back then and closed his eyes—and through the tight-shut lids saw a vision: Blondino, head up and laughing, riding free, riding fast, and riding far. A new and greater bitterness welled up in him, but, as before, was only for himself. He did not blame Dan'l; the old man simply saw matters as he was bound to see them.

When rough, hard hands jerked him up and set him on his feet he did not struggle; between two men he half hopped, was half dragged to the little nearby tent and tossed inside like a bag of grain. He set his teeth, and not so much as a groan broke through them. A man brought a candle and set it in a little mound of dirt, then stood over him, as watchful of every movement as though Hawk had been free and armed instead of helpless in bonds and empty holstered. The guard was the cowboy Curly; Bud Bell looked in to say that he'd send another man in half an hour, so that no single individual need be longer than that shut up with such a reptile as their prisoner. There were plenty of men who'd be willing to make the sacrifice just for the sheer joy of high duty done!

No sooner had Bell departed than Dan'l came.

"I know this here gent, Curly," he said warningly. "He's a slick son-of-a-gun; he'll get loose and carve your throat, too, for full measure with what any other man would call a half-chance. Got the ropes tight enough?"

"It's all right, Dan'l," answered Curly. "I've got my eye on him, and if he looked cross-eyed I'd just as lief let candlelight through his ornery carcass."

"You'd need to shoot fast, mind ye," advised Dan'l calmly. "I don't want to seem selfish, but after this I don't want him getting loose. He's no respecter of white hairs, this sarpint."

With that Dan'l withdrew, to be gone something over a full half-hour. For when he looked in again Curly had gone, his place taken by another man. Dan'l nodded approvingly.

"I told Curly how to watch this snake," he told the new guard. "Not to take a chance size of an ant's toe-

nail with him. Guess Curly passed the warning on, didn't he, Jerry?"

Jerry grinned.

"He did for sure, Dan'l; onnecessary, I'd call it."

Dan'l came closer to stand over the prostrate form. and into his old eyes, gleaming in the candlelight, came a look which Jerry set down in the tablets of his memory as the wickedest he had ever seen.

"Tell you something, Hawk," said Dan'l with a leer. "All these years I've had my doubts too—like Bud Bell has, like Charlie Bell ever had; you said it was Blondino robbed us and killed some. I've sort of thought it was you! It's my notion you're the crookedest crook as ever crept and crawled—and that we got you dead to rights for once. It's my notion—"

"Look out for the candle, Dan'l!" called Jerry.

Dan'l turned quickly—and, instead of avoiding the candle, struck it over with his foot. Sudden dark filled the tent.

"Quick, Jerry! Quick, man!" came Dan'l's voice, sounding nervous and alarmed. "Grab the candle. It's rolled out under the flap. This gent ain't to be allowed a minute of dark. Hurry up, man. I'll keep my foot on his neck, but you better get a light. Lie still, Hawk! I got a knife, and if you wiggle your ears I'll rip you from boot-heel to top-knot."

Hawk felt quick hands running over him; felt the rope about his ankles part suddenly, letting the blood come rushing back; felt the prick of a knife on his wrist as, understanding, he rolled to his side; had his hands free! It was done with almost incredible swiftness. There was a whisper in his ear:

"Your horse saddled—straight back by th' big pine, th' other side—"

And, whispering done, Dan'l's voice, sharp and lively:

"Go ahead, Jerry, and find the candle. Just remember what I keep on telling you about this night-creeping side-winder. Take no chances, that's my motto—"

Jerry struck a match to find the candle; looked first for the candle, then to his prisoner. All he saw was Dan'l's old face, all puckered up as though in bewilderment. Otherwise the tent was empty.

"See?" said Dan'l, with the "I-told-you-so" intonation. "You shouldn't have took nary a chance with that gent. You've let him loose, that's what you've done, Jerry, m' son."

CHAPTER XXVII

TO LIGHT A SIGNAL FIRE

ONCE in the saddle, bare-headed and unarmed, Julian Hawk was off and away like a storm wind blowing. There was a wild clatter of shod hoofs in flinty ground, an occasional spark struck out, a rush through the night as horse and rider gave a brief account of themselves before vanishing into the dark, all sounds dying away. A shouting of voices, Bud Bell's breaking with new rage, a scattering fire of rifles and revolvers, silence and the friendly dark, and Hawk riding head up and laughing, riding fast and riding far!

"God bless old Danny! Let man never again doubt his friend!"

He was over a ridge, down in a cañon, taking it easy now. Then out of the cañon mouth and upon the level lands, a drifting dot upon the wide field of the desert.

There was something tied to the horn of his saddle. Quick, investigating fingers told him what it was. Spurs, a revolver—his own or Dan'l's—his hat! Hawk laughed aloud.

"Never, never on earth was there a man like Dan'l!"

But this exultant mood of Hawk's was short-lived. He was free—but Blondino had escaped him. It had been his purpose to let Blondino go—for the present—but to dog him like his own shadow. Now how come up with him again? Already the man was miles away and not stopping to loiter on his way. At last he had been tempted to crime north of the border: Parmalee

dead, Tom March badly wounded, and at Blondino's hand, if Hawk guessed aright. In the mountains they would come to know shortly when Kid French's tale was proven false or true, when some man surely identified the gun with the two emptied cartridges. Were it to prove to be Victor Blondino's weapon—and Hawk was dead sure of it already—then Victor Blondino had at length reached the pass when one of his own crimes threatened to bring him down.

"I'd have followed him—I'd have stuck close—I'd have come up with him at that place he's headed for! And now?"

Now, due to Bud Bell's interference, it was to be all guesswork; or at least, largely so. Hawk turned out across the desert, making a bee-line toward Nacional. The little border town, he chose to believe, would lie athwart Blondino's pathway; that place to which Blondino would head now, if what Chavez, the Squirrel, had told him were true, if Hawk's own suspicions were in line with the truth, lay still farther south in Mexico. There was the chance that even yet Hawk might overhaul his man in Nacional, lulled into a false sense of security. Blondino, after the first hot, headlong rush was over, would tarry, if even briefly, somewhere; he'd want food and drink, and perhaps was fool enough to waste his precious time in sleep. To Nacional then, the shortest way, and if the Fates smiled there'd yet be that accounting to which he had looked these many years.

And if he found no Blondino in Nacional, and picked up no track of him there? Well, then, in that case the long trail would run on and still on, perhaps across still further long, weary years until in the end he completed the task he had set his hand to bring to full fruition.

If not to-night, then to-morrow; if not to-morrow, then upon some other remote *mañana*.

But he had been so close to what he wanted! With Blondino on the run for murder, for mowing down a man like Tom March, Blondino would run for a certain place like a fox to his hole. And if only Hawk could come upon him there in the first hour of his arrival!

As he rode he strove to estimate how far ahead of him his quarry now sped on—half a dozen miles in the lead, or twice that? How much time had passed from the moment when he had set Blondino free and the moment when Dan'l, blessed old Dan'l, kicked over the candle and cut the rope? An hour? Two hours? Not above two hours; even, possibly, less than the one. His blood leaped through his eager body. Blondino might be not above six or eight miles ahead and already overconfident. Hawk drove his horse hard that night, telling himself a hundred times that the best of rare good luck was possible, that he might yet come upon the fleeing man in Nacional.

Now, one had a choice of ways, traveling between the Blue Smokes and the border-line in the vicinity of Nacional. He could go by way of the Little Mesa country, as so many did, resting there, or at least watering; he could leave the Sentinel of the Desert several miles away to the north and west and go by way of Date Palm Johnny's and on down by Rapidan's Ranch and the old Alarcon rancho. This second route was the one which Chancy Burns had taken with his wagon, the road being better, the desert sooner done with, the traveling faster for rolling wheels. Not a half-hour's difference one way or the other for Hawk on horseback—and he decided for the trail through the Little Mesa country. That way had Blondino come before; it was at

least probable that that way would he return, provided always that he turned toward Nacional at all! Ah, there was the thorn, nagging through the long, still hours. Through the Little Mesa country, then, where the old Sentinel rose lofty against the sky, to follow Blondino at every step, praying that somewhere along the long road he might be tempted to loiter.

It was close upon midnight when he rode down through the rock-flanked, narrow pass into the cottonwoods among the Little Mesas. A great rugged spire, black and brooding, the Sentinel of the Desert stood in clear outline against the field of stars. Hawk looked up and recalled all that had happened here for him in the shadow of this mighty rock; an old friend—as such did he regard the Sentinel. Memories, new memories, yet seeming strangely to be a part of some old, remote past dropped down on him here, taking him all unaware, brushing him with their gentle wings, changing the look in his eyes which had grown so hard on the man-trail, causing him to fill his lungs with a long, deep breath, and to let the imprisoned air go lingeringly. La Güera—she had left something of herself behind here; it trickled down from the starshine, falling as softly as night dews; it whispered to his inner ear on the thin little breeze playing sleepily among the cottonwoods. And he thanked God that at least she was safe now; far behind him and safe from Blondino. Safe from Blondino for evermore.

He watered his horse on arriving, again on departing. Between the two drinks offered his animal he spaced some ten minutes. Time enough to slack a cinch and let the horse "blow" and nibble at the rich grass by the creek; time enough for Hawk to smoke a cigarette and go to the lonely log cabin, making sure that no one was here. He had not overlooked the possibility, vague as

it was, that Blondino might have tarried here. The ten minutes passed swiftly, and yet he was impatient to be again in the saddle, forging on; he should be in Nacional with the first hint of dawn.

He soon passed out of the pleasant area of trees and water and flowers, and into the sandy solitudes once more. At times he glanced backward over the undulating silver-gray waste, never once ignoring the fact that Bud Bell was not the man to lie down at any crisis, watchful of possible pursuit. But, always finding the open expanses empty, his eyes with his wishes traveled for the most part on ahead. And at last, when he had ridden something more than a quarter of the distance between the cottonwoods and Nacional, he made out in the distance a horseman riding toward him. Hawk stopped his own horse at the edge of a small thicket of mesquite, not caring to be seen until he himself had made out if here came one man only or several.

It proved to be a solitary rider and one evidently bent on arriving somewhere in the shortest possible time. Another late-comer, perhaps, racing on to the golconda of the Blue Smokes. Hawk rode out to meet him and waved his hat and called; the other man stopped willingly enough, and even turned aside the few necessary yards to come close.

"*Que hay, amigo?*" Hawk called, by way of casual greeting. The other, a border Mexican, returned his salutation in kind. He appeared to be a young fellow, scarcely more than a boy.

"*Donde va?*" queried Hawk carelessly.

"*Aja!*" was the response, and the boy pointed. Straight ahead.

To the Little Mesa country? Sure. And then? Back to Nacional.

"But," Hawk informed him, "there is no one there at the ranch. I have just come that way."

No difference. The boy grinned. His job was to go there and to build a fire! Then to do anything he liked, which, of course, would be to go back whence he came. And he'd take a nice cool job like this any time. The pay was bully.

"Light a fire?" At the words Hawk became all keen interest.

Sure. That was all. There was stuff kept there, all ready to burn. Stuff that made black smoke by day. Other stuff that at night was like the sun coming up. And the boy had better hurry up, too. If he got the big blaze going quick, then more pay for him when he went back to Nacional—

"Look here!" said Hawk sharply. "Who's paying for this? Who wants the fire built?"

Why, as to that the boy didn't know everything. Was one to fool around asking questions, when it was the matter of twenty pesos for a little ride?—forty pesos if one made fine time! That strange gentleman of the Hacienda Escondida had something to do with it—yes, the Señor Castañares. But why should Señor Castañares want a fire built on the Sentinel of the Desert? The boy had thought of that, too! While he was riding, you know. He had an idea that the lady was the one—

He let out a sharp wail of pain and terror as Hawk's hand leaped out and caught him by the shoulder.

What lady? The beautiful señorita at the Hacienda, of course; the one who had come just now with Victor Blondino and his men—

"Who was she? What is her name? What does she look like? Tell me; tell me everything!"

But he did not know who she was? She was beau-

tiful, that was so. She had eyes like an angel. And she looked white; tired, maybe? Scared? He did not know all this. He had had only a glimpse. Just as she was going— Ouch! *Seguro, seguro que si!* she had ridden away with Blondino and his men—

"Get down," commanded Hawk, and so sternly that the boy shivered and could not slip to the ground fast enough. "We are going to change saddles. I've ridden a dozen or fifteen miles farther than you, and I'm a good sixty pounds heavier. You can go on and light your fire—though I've the notion it was for me! You'll stay at the cabin over night. And you'll take care of my horse. I am going to give you not twenty but fifty pesos. And if men come in the night or early morning from the Blue Smokes, asking of all this, you can tell them that I ride south for a word with your Blondino."

With the fresher animal under him. Hawk left a gawking half-bred youth staring alternately after him and what had been left in the brown palm, and made new haste to come to Nacional. Blondino had reached the border—had gone on—and a "lady" went with him. "And she looked white; tired, maybe? Scared?"

Blondino, then, must have had a good two hours' head start, and must have ridden every step of the way at a horse-killing rate. He had no doubt stopped at the Hacienda only to change horses—and was already up and away, riding hard again—headed to that one spot, wherever it might be, that Hawk so longed to come up with him.

And a "lady" rode with him! The Kid had told him of the encounter in the cabin among the cottonwoods; he had guessed that La Güera was in the Blue Smokes—he and the Kid, before the shooting of Tom March and

Parmalee, had sneaked close to camp. And neither Hawk nor Dan'l had seen anything of La Güera after that—

He saved a horse whenever he could. To-night he came as close as ever in his life to riding his mount to death. When he came to the little horseshoe hills just before reaching the border he saw Nacional looking like a pretty little toy village through a wan thinning of the dark. He rode down the empty, dusty road; the wicked little town slept. It had poured nearly all of its men folk northward to the Blue Smokes; there were no belated roisterers; every house was dark. He hurried along, his horse's hoof-beats ringing out with emphasized loudness; dogs here and there began to bark, and a startled rooster crowed. Other roosters caught the shrill bugling and answered it. Other dogs barked—and here, some moments early, Hawk brought a new day into Nacional.

He rode straight to the Hidden Hacienda. There, too, all was drowsy silence; when his horse stopped it was silent under the old pepper-trees since neither roosters nor dogs had a place in the Hacienda gardens. At the stable a boy who had been asleep came out rubbing his eyes. Hawk left his horse here, gave the boy an American bank-note, told him to swap the saddle to the best fresh horse he had— "On business with Blondino!" was his curt explanation, which the boy was free to interpret as he pleased, and hurried on to the old home. Dark in front, he went around to the rear. In one window only did a light burn.

Hawk went to that window and tapped on the sill. A curtain was thrust aside, a face looked out through the iron bars. Here, fully dressed, was Señor Castañares.

"*Quien es?*" he demanded quickly.

"You may not remember me, señor. The American, Julian Hawk—"

A strange, eager cry broke from Castañares.

"So soon, señor? But that is like magic! A moment—To the door—"

The face vanished from the window and Hawk heard steps hurrying on a bare plank floor. The little door, set so deep in the old adobe wall, opened; Castañares beckoned and called softly, scarcely above a whisper.

"This way, señor. The others sleep. Sh!"

Hawk followed him, tip-toeing. A moment later Castañares ushered him into a room where the solitary lamp burned; the room of the painting. There were fresh roses upon the marble-topped stand. It was the painting which first caught, then held Hawk's eyes—he was startled; he wondered that he had not in the very beginning noted the likeness— But, of course, it was different, seeing the painting the second time, after knowing so well every feature, every look of La Güera.

"You see, Señor Hawk, how I remember you! Of course. And I was thinking that you would come, too. Though not so soon. The fire on the great peak can scarcely be lighted—"

"It was for me then? And it was the suggestion of—"

"Of La Güera! Of course, señor." The full, black eyes flashed, the horribly scarred face was drawn into lines of anxiety. "And you—"

"La Güera?" said Hawk. And then asked curiously: "you know her real name—"

"To be sure. The name La Güera was given her by one she loved well, a saintly soul in the convent; so let her keep it. Her true name is Juana; she is my daughter, señor!"

"So you know? At last you know—"

"Everything, señor," said Castañares simply. Then his eyes, all of a sudden shining through tears, went to the painting. He lifted his hand; he spoke softly now: "Juana has told me—that my señora, her mother, is dead. It does not seem possible, does it señor—that God would let that be? But then, what is death? For myself, I have never feared it; have you, señor? It would be terrible for my Juana—my other Juana—but for a second only, señor? Then that is over. Then the spirit flies free—and waits for another spirit to run to meet it! I have been waiting here—she has been waiting, too. A little time—*mañana*—we will be together—"

A singularly sweet smile radiated over the pitifully marred face, streaming from the dark, splendid eyes. But it was a mere flash of light and gone instantly.

"You wonder why I am here, and La Güera gone? She went with Blondino; I could not help that, señor. But I could do what she wanted done; have the fire lighted on the Sentinel of the Desert—and wait for your coming. You will understand, if God gave you understanding," he went on sternly, "that what I have done to-night is the harder thing. To have hurled myself at Blondino's throat, to have followed—to have died swiftly, señor"—his eyes went wistfully, but for only an instant, to the painting—"would have been, oh, so very easy, compared to what I have done."

"Yes," said Hawk quite simply. "I understand that."

"*Gracias, señor.*" A very courtly inclination of the head was graceful expression of Castañares' gratitude. "So what I did was obey the wishes of La Güera Castañares—and take a step on my own account. I sent two boys riding to-night, señor. The second one followed Blondino at a safe distance. I ran out and watched what I could. I know they rode south on the Camino de los

Robles. I know that the boy who rode after them will know which way they turned where, ten miles away, that road forks. And that is all, señor."

"Fine!" Hawk's eyes began to sparkle; here was something definite. "So *adios*, señor. I must ride."

"A moment! Here is a flask of good brandy. And a bite to eat. Your horse—"

Hawk took the brandy and the parcel of food and hastened out. At the stable he found his fresh horse ready. He went up into the saddle; the animal, all pent-up fire, leaped under him. At a run he circled the house, sped out through the wide gateway, and turned into the road. And just in time he head a voice shouting —whooping—calling to him to "wait a minute." And down the road came a man running.

Here was Chancy Burns, who, having left the Blue Smokes early in the morning, had arrived here during the night. A Chancy Burns tremendously excited, clamoring, waving both hands—swearing volubly.

"That Jake Blondine's been here and vamoosed!" he got out at last. "They say he's skipping the country for good this time. And the low-life, ornery varmint owes me sixteen hundred dollars for my fifty gal—"

Hawk snorted, wheeled his horse, and rode off.

"I'm after him," he shouted back over his shoulder.

"Wait for me!" wailed Chancy Burns, and started running again.

But Hawk was on his way, and clouds of dust shut him away from Chancy's straining eyes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SUDDEN MOUNTAINS

It was a tremendous weight that Julian Hawk felt he carried on his shoulders as he rode southward through the new morning; his the responsibility for what had happened—for whatever was to happen. His the hand which had led La Güera Castañares into the Blue Smokes Mountains; his the hand which had freed Victor Blondino. Here was Blondino swaggeringly at liberty, safely across the border and pressing on deeper into old Mexico. And with him went La Güera.

As the day brightened Hawk saw a crooked roadway, scarcely more than a dim, dusty trail, winding across dry level lands, twisting along into little rolling hills. Farther in the distance, perhaps half a day's ride away, maybe a full day, rose the blue tops of mountains. There ahead, somewhere among the little hills, only two hours ahead of him, rode Blondino's little party—rollicking captors, drooping captive. Two hours—how many miles? Not less than fifteen; perhaps twenty. Strong, fresh horses, eager riders.

"They'll never stop until they're in Blondino's stronghold. There they'll tarry; there I'll come up with them. Their lead of a dozen or twenty miles means nothing. She will be all right until I come. It's my job. I've made it my job—"

How many men he might have to contend with before another day came he did not stop to consider. He thought only of Blondino. There were half a dozen of

his followers with him. Had there been twice the number, and that doubled again, Hawk would have continued to think of only Blondino. At times he unconsciously squared his shoulders as though he set them stubbornly to bear any weight—so that, soon, he could stand where he might demand the settling of an old account. His frowning eyes ran distastefully over the gently swelling country which he was invading; it was green now because it was so early spring, but soon would turn tawny and yellow and then an intolerable burnt brown, and in the end blazing harsh aridity. Eyes already hard and stern grew harder, sterner. He wanted to be done with all this, to ride northward again—back to his own country. Pray God this was his last ride down into old Mexico. And he knew it was his last. Victor or vanquished, his last ride down here. By another day he would have given this Southern land his bones for all time, or a view of his back for what time it took to regain the border. For not once did he consider the possibility of Blondino eluding him.

From the crest of the first of the little hills he looked back, straining his eyes into the northern distances. Far away, just a glint as of a winking star, was a point of light—the beacon fire on the Sentinel of the Desert. Even as he looked the daylight brightened and the point of light winked itself out, a star lost in the morning. Would they have seen that in the Blue Smokes? Would they have made anything of it? Dan'l and John Cobb and old Sam, if they saw it, would no doubt say: "It's that fool Chancy Burns wanting something. He ever was a fool, was Chancy Burns!" Ah, and they'd hold to that, Chancy's folly, despite Chancy's coup with the six-horse team and the considerable sums of money his effort had poured into their pockets; despite Chancy's vision of a

new town springing up in the Blue Smokes, with Chancy first and sole merchant and general dispenser of miscellaneous necessities. Be sure the six-horse team would pull another heavy load—and still another, did the vision town actually come into existence; and there'd be houses Chancy built, a stage-line Chancy operated! He was the sort of man to let others take the raw gold out of the ground, himself pleasantly occupied taking it out of their pockets!

Ten miles out of Nacional, Hawk came to the first forking of the way. Here, among the little hills which began to be dotted with oaks, one was offered a choice of two ravines with nothing to indicate either as being the right or wrong one. Tracks? Tracks by the hundred, that was the trouble. For the most part sheep tracks, a woolly herd having evidently passed this way during the early morning. Hawk stopped his horse and sat pondering.

For one thing, where was the boy whom Castañares had sent this way to report on Blondino's movements? A lazy young Indian, no doubt; one who would loll about Nacional, only lively enough to keep out of Castañares' sight until some hours passed, then idling back to the hacienda and telling his vagabond's lie readily and taking his pay. Hawk knew the breed and its ways. What other explanation? Think of any other and explain why he had not encountered the boy on his return.

The thing to do now, of course, was to strike into either cañon at random, to ride on, hoping to pick up tracks at some place beyond the crossing of the sheep. Hawk turned to the right. Here the oaks were larger and stood more thickly set, their still, black shadows across the road. Within a few hundred yards he came to a watering trough where a spring gushed from the

bank. And here he came upon what Blondino, or one of his men, had left to mark his passing—the stark body of Castañares' messenger. He had been shot through the head at close range.

For a moment Hawk sat his frightened horse, staring down with blazing eyes out of a face grown dark with rage. He saw the body, twisted in horrible, grotesque fashion, the little ridges of dust thrust up at the boot-heels; he saw through this and saw Blondino; he looked on and into the heart of that inhuman, laughing devil. Presently he dismounted, led his horse to a distance and tied him, returned and carried the boy into the shade of an oak, disposing the limbs anew, drawing the gaudy neck scarf over the face.

"One thing, my boy," he said, straightening up and for a moment standing quietly, his hat in his hand, "you've told me which way Blondino went! *Gracias, amigo.* I owe you something; maybe, before another day, I can repay something of it. Brought your rifle with you, too, did you? Thought you might see a coyote? You'd never have brought it to use against Blondino, would you?" He took up the weapon where it lay at the roadside. "Thanks again, *amigo.* Some little fellows carry on after death; perhaps you're like that?"

He went back to his horse, rode it in a wide, trembling circle about all that was left of the Indian boy, and struck into a gallop. He was sure of the road now. Sure, too, that this had not been Blondino's own work. No, Blondino was too tricky for that; he'd have carried the body back to the forks of the road. Some one of his following had been left behind, tarrying here to mark if any followed, with orders to stop any too curious. He would have hidden among the oaks, would have marked the boy when he approached the cañon's mouth.

The boy would have come on as far as the spring; for a drink, to water his horse.

And what Blondino had done once would he not do again? Would there not be another rearguard? The same man, perhaps, who, having done his bloody work here, would ride on to some other pretty place of ambush, another forking of the way, and lie hidden in hope of a second chance to play at his pleasant game? It was at least likely; it was not to be ignored; yet it was in no way to serve as a deterrent. Hawk rode with keener eye, with the newly acquired rifle across his arm, but he rode straight on. And on.

And now he found plentiful fresh signs of riders having passed this way recently: trampled grass at the roadside, fresh tracks in the dust. He had passed the watering trough some miles, had done at last with the sheep tracks, and knew himself to be on the right road. The little hills grew more rugged, as though swollen with some half-hearted desire to grow into mountains, lost heart, and dwindled away again. The oaks, with long, gray moss hanging straight down from their wide branches, were wider and wider spaced, marching down to a little valley. The distant mountains became a deeper blue and then faded into a smoky shade, and they, too, had the appearance of dwindling as, though he drew ever nearer, the mounting sun had the effect of thrusting them back. He watched every gully, he shot quick, suspicious glances at every oak big boled enough to hide a man, he rode warily about every bend of the road. And again and again he was assured—and with a little twinge of disappointment!—that none tarried here to discuss the way with him as with the poor Indian boy.

It was high noon when he left the first string of hills for the valley lands; mid-afternoon, and his horse

was jaded and leg-weary, when he rode into hills again. He began to believe that Blondino had been satisfied in leaving the one man at the first crossroads, and that that individual, having disposed of the Indian boy and perhaps having lingered another hour or so, had galloped on to overtake the fugitive party with a report that all was well. Hawk did not relax in vigilance, but his expectations of any attempt to interrupt his progress lessened steadily. Until at last he came to the mountains themselves.

The Sudden Mountains! Such was the meaning of the Mexican name they bore locally. He had traveled toward them all day long; they had appeared farther away at midday than in the first light. And in the late afternoon he was among their broken slopes almost without knowing it. A queer quirk of topography caused the bare, flinty peaks to appear to rush to a meeting with him; he had passed through some broken hills, down into a barranca, around a shoulder of horizontally stratified earth, brown and yellow, and all without warning found himself staring upward at sheer precipices. Before him a trail wound into a shadowy cañon, a gorge lofty walled; a place of awful silence and of utter bleak barrenness save for the thorny cactus, whose very kingdom this forsaken spot might be. Rocks bestrewed the trail; his weary horse stumbled—came down on both knees—and from somewhere in the narrow pass a rifle shot, reverberating within the cramped confines of the place, rang out, and there was the thin hiss of lead flying close to his head. Hawk hurled himself clear of the saddle; he was on the ground, crouching, before the weary animal had regained its footing.

He saw a tiny puff of smoke; it hung all but motionless in the still air at the side of a jumble of bowlders

just ahead where the trail wound around a shoulder of the mountain.

"A good shot, just playing in bad luck," Hawk judged. If his horse hadn't stumbled. "Let him try it on again, though! Show an arm or a leg—stick your head up—"

But he did not remain where he stood, in the open. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a great slab of rock, fallen long ago from high above, offering itself as a breastwork every bit as good as that of which his assailant had availed himself. He began backing off toward it, his rifle at his shoulder, feeling the way cautiously with his feet.

His unspoken invitation to "try it on again; show an arm or leg" went the profitless way of unspoken invitations in general. Save for that solitary white puff, thinning and vanishing, there had been no stir, and after the sound of the shot, tossed back and forth by the towering cliffs, died it was as silent as death in this anteroom to the fastnesses of the Sudden Mountains. Hawk made himself comfortable where he was; the first consideration after an essential vigilance was comfort. He knew better than crouch on straining muscles, for a cramped muscle might in a minute or two come to make no end of difference. He eased himself down, kept his rifle cocked, his finger on the trigger, and told himself it would not be long to wait.

Nor was he wrong. He caught a winking glimmer of light, the sun striking against metal over yonder near the pile of bowlders. He saw the nose of a rifle thrust cautiously forward; it was like the grim head of a rattlesnake. He couldn't see the man, couldn't glimpse hand or arm. He watched the rifle move slowly; it was being lifted. Yet it did not point in Hawk's direction—

"The murdering whelp!" grunted Hawk, and blazed

away at all he could see—the rifle barrel. For he made out what target was being sought—his jaded horse standing, head dropped low, in the flinty trail. "And that's shooting!" he added complacently, and came closer actually chuckling than he had done for many an hour. For his bullet must have flattened itself with a fearful shock against the other man's rifle barrel, and, best of of all, the rifle itself was dropped. Its owner made an over-eager gesture to reclaim it, leaned some short inches too far out, and Hawk shot the second time, drilling his man either through the shoulder or the upper body. Hawk leaped to his feet and ran forward.

"Drop it! Drop it! Pull back or I'll pot you clean!"

He made his way up the steep slope, very leisurely in his movements as he reached a place where the slope steepened abruptly. Foolish haste might bring a man winded to the end of his short run and not so steady as he needed to be. Then, too, it was well to have eyes everywhere at once; rattlesnakes run often in pairs. And finally his man had dropped down out of sight and, though the rifle had not been taken up, might have a revolver in his hand now. So Hawk, coming on somewhat more cautiously, with his own rifle in his left hand, carried his revolver in his right.

But what he found when at last he could see behind the bowlders was a badly hurt, thoroughly frightened, and anything but dangerous man. A little starved-looking half-breed with wildly staring eyes, shrinking back among the rocks, white to the lips, a hand pressed to his side and already red with blood.

"For the love of God, señor!" he gasped, a terror-constricted throat barely allowing the words articulation.

Hawk stared down at him with contempt. Here he came upon the usual thing in assassins, a rank coward. Indubitably the man was severely wounded, yet it remained that the game was of his instigation, and a man playing at such a game should be made of sterner stuff.

"I am glad to inform you," he said sternly, "that the gun which brought you down is the gun of the Indian boy you killed back there by the watering trough. I made a sort of promise to the dead boy—"

All the while the fallen man was licking his lips, his eyes roving wildly.

"I have killed no one to-day!" he said eagerly. "It was Zambo. He came laughing about it—"

"Zambo?" Hawk demanded. "Zambo did the killing? Now, who the devil is Zambo?"

"Señor! For the love of—"

"Shut up!"

"But I am dying!"

"Think so? Asked for it, didn't you?" He stepped closer and removed the reddened hand, swiftly gauging the seriousness of the wound. Stepping back, he only laughed. "So you're dying, huh? And it hurts? Would you like, *hombre,* for me to put you out of your misery?"

A choking scream was his answer. Hawk sat down on a rock, his rifle between his knees, his revolver again at his belt, and made himself a cigarette. The man was not dying and was not going to die—unless he frightened himself into it. Or unless he allowed himself to bleed to death. Or unless he caught his oozing courage and tried to draw his gun.

"If you die," said Hawk, making his voice as cold and harsh as he knew how to do, "why, then there's going to be weeping and wailing throughout Mexico, no

doubt. But in time the sorrow will pass. Now, you're a yellow-hearted coward, eh? And you ought to be dead, but have some silly preference toward living?"

The half-breed looked at him in dull half-comprehension.

"Tell you," went on Hawk cheerfully. "Answer a few questions, being very sure that you answer truthfully; then do what I tell you, and I won't kill you."

"Anything, señor! The Holy Virgin is my witness—"

"Who killed the Indian boy?"

"I told you. It was Zambo. I swear it."

"Who and what is Zambo?"

"That is what he is! We call him that because he is a zambo. A white zambo—"

"Meaning a white nigger?" grunted Hawk.

"*Si, señor!* Just that. A big nigger, pure blooded, only white. Pink eyes, too!" The man, so great had been his fear, so did hope leap within him, was all eagerness. He could not talk fast enough, could not sufficiently emphasize; he wanted to repeat, to tell everything.

"Yes, señor. A pink-eyed zambo; a big man and very strong and very fierce. He is deaf, too, and has no tongue. They say that those things make him mad. He likes killing."

"Where is this Zambo now?"

"He is with Señor Blondino. Of course! He stayed behind only a little while. Then he came on."

"And you took his place? You dropped back from Blondino's party and—"

"No, no, señor! I was not of that party. Not exactly, I mean," he hastened to qualify his statement as he marked a change in the eyes bent on him. "You see, I have a cabin not far from here. I stay here, all alone—"

"But your job to-day was to guard the trail? To

pot any man who followed? Then, no doubt, to report to Blondino—"

"No, señor! You see, I tell everything. Even secrets. Even Señor Blondino's plans! I was to wait here until about dark. Then ride to the Rancho El Conejo. To have horses ready, you see—"

"Horses? For Blondino?"

"*Si, señor. Si, si, señor!* For Blondino. To-morrow morning he wants to ride. Fast, señor! Something must have happened. He wants horses ready at the Conejo, so that he won't have to waste time there. He is in a hurry—"

"Where is he now?"

"He has gone ahead. To the rock house. He stays there to-night."

"Who are with him?"

"His men; about seven or eight. And Zambo, of course. And at the rock house, the old woman."

"That is all?" asked Hawk innocently.

The eyes which had been so frightened, into which hope had begun to return and then which grew cunning and shifty, were lifted in what appeared pure honesty. And then all of a sudden fear rushed back.

"I will tell everything, señor! Those are the ones of Blondino's gang. The woman, some say, is his mother. Surely Zambo is his right hand. And there are others. A girl. And—and a padre, maybe. Of that I do not know. A man was sent for a priest; whether he has come or not I do not know, señor."

A priest? So Blondino was still set in his determination to force a marriage? To wed La Güera, to have her sign certain papers after she was wed—

"How far to the rock house?"

"Four or five miles. There is but one trail—"

"Do you think to find another? To slip ahead of me? No, needn't answer; I guess you won't. Where is your horse?"

"In the trail, a hundred yards farther—"

"I'll bring him to you presently. I'll even tie up your hurt for you. I'll put you into the saddle and you'll ride straight out of the mountains. You'll ride as fast as you can and as straight. Or do you want to bleed to death? No, needn't answer this time, either. You will do as I tell you. First, now tell me all about the rock house, where it is, what sort of a camp the men have there."

Four or five miles farther on, Hawk learned, there was a little level place into which a narrow gorge led, which opened out like a circle, which had tall cliffs standing straight up all about it. There was water there, and there in a couple of flimsy shacks Blondino's men camped. Not Blondino himself, not the old woman, not the white zambo. They held apart, those two, old hag and negro, and they alone did Blondino trust. They had a place like an eagle's nest!

There was a trail, winding up along the cliffs, narrow and dangerous. It led up and up; among the peaks, with places for a man to drop down a thousand feet. No horse could go there, only a man on foot, and best for him to go sober! This trail led to a chasm, a fearful place. A swinging bridge carried one across if he was not afraid. You could drop a stone there and wait and wait for it to strike at the bottom. Then, after the swinging bridge there was a short strip of trail, and all of a sudden a flat place just big enough to hold a house and leave room to walk around. A house there, built all of rough rocks—that was Blondino's place.

Hawk brought the wounded man's horse, and having

helped with the wound, got him into his saddle, where he sat looking sick and weak.

"Your one best bet," Hawk told him, making sure of him by putting fresh fear into him, "is to make for a doctor as fast as you can go."

The fellow groaned and took up his reins in one hand while the other clung to the horn of his saddle. A final evil flicker came into his sullen black eyes.

"When you meet up with those two—Blondino and Zambo!—give them my love, señor!"

Hawk watched him out of sight, even following to the first bend in the trail and waiting there to see him reappear out on the crest of the first of the little foothills. Then he returned to his own horse. But instead of mounting he unsaddled, turned the animal loose, and hid his saddle and bridle among the rocks. The next four or five miles he preferred to take on foot. It was already late afternoon, but he did not care to come to the camp among the cliffs until dark. Further, his horse was lame, and finally a shod horse, stumbling along, made too much noise. Nor did he choose to tie the poor brute. There'd be other horses to be had at Blondino's camp—if Hawk were to need a horse again! If not, no use leaving this poor devil here, hung up on a rope, to die of thirst and hunger.

Marking how long the shadows of the peaks were growing, he put foot to trail and went forward. Blondino only four or five miles away—and at that place where Hawk had so long yearned to come upon him. Blondino run to earth at the end of a long, long trail—

CHAPTER XXIX

ZAMBO

DAYLIGHT was fading rapidly. Already night filled the narrow cañons, and only the rocky heights were still clothed in thin, dusky light. Hawk waited impatiently for night to come also to those higher places.

He lay hidden among bowlders. He had crept here cautiously, warned by careless voices that he was near the camp of Blondino's men. The place was as he had heard it described; a circular level spot where a deep gorge widened, ringed about by towering cliffs. In the last light he had seen men going about; horses feeding. Down here was water. He had seen little pieces of the trail which wound up and up among the cliffs, climbing steeply, losing itself in rocky folds, wriggling into view again around bold promontories. Very high above, offering but a vague glimpse of itself, was the bridge. He judged it to be formed by two parallel ropes stretched across the chasm, with a bit of planking suspended just below by other ropes. And across the bridge, which from so far below looked the insubstantial creation of a spider's architecture, was the squat, square stone house. There would he come to the final grip with Blondino. There would he find La Güera.

As night drew on a fire blazed out in the hollow where the camp was. But no ray of light shone out from the rocky heights. If there were any windows in the stone house, they were not visible from Hawk's position; if any door on this side, it was no doubt closed. Long as he

watched and waited, there was no gleam of lamp or candle. But after a while a shower of sparks whirled upward from a deep-mouthed chimney. Still he waited, for not yet had the dark blotted out those portions of the dizzy trail where it threaded its way about out-thrust shoulders of cliff. What he could see from where he lay could be seen by men in the camp. He had odds enough against him up there with Blondino and the zambo, without inviting several others to join the party.

At last he judged the time had come when he might move on without danger of being seen. Standing up to take the first step, he was stayed again, this time by a voice from a distance, far down the trail he had already traveled, hallooing. A shout from the camp answered; here came some one expected. Hawk dropped back into his place and awaited the new arrival. He was sure of so little: it might even be Blondino arriving only now. It might be—any one.

Two men rode into the hollow; he saw them dismount by the fire. The priest with the messenger who had been sent for him!

They left their horses and turned toward the foot of the trail which climbed upward; thus presently they came within a few feet of where Hawk was. He heard some low words, a mere blur of sound, from the priest who spoke heavily, walked heavily, and was undoubtedly weary. There was a quick answer from his guide: "In a minute, Father. We are almost there." He wondered if the priest knew why he was wanted here; no doubt some lying tale had been told him.

The two passed on, vanishing in the gloom higher up on the mountain-side. Hawk rose again, waited a moment to make sure that no one was following them from the hollow, then began to make his own way toward the

heights. Now and again, several times in all, he heard voices on ahead of him, the priest's, evidently concerned about this hazardous way which they traveled, his guide's reassuring him. They went very slowly; very slowly Hawk followed, yet at times he forced himself to stop, to give them time to gain on him. As it was, he was so close most of the time that he could hear every word that passed between them.

It grew darker and still darker. The priest's guide struck matches many times, holding them low, their short-lived flare showing the narrow trail underfoot and a great, all-engulfing void at the side.

"I tried to get us here earlier, while it was still light, Padre—"

"Are there no lanterns, then?"

"But no oil! You see, this place is so far out. And even the candle-ends were all burnt out. But we are going safely— *Take care, Padre!*"

Hawk heard a sudden exclamation; there was a rain of dirt and loose stones cascading down a perpendicular flank of the mountain.

"This is terrible," muttered the priest. "It is madness—"

"It is easier now, Padre, to go on than go back. We are almost there."

Hawk could light no matches; could only feel his way along, his hand running over the rocks at his side, catching at chance handholds, his feet groping. He drew nearer those who went before, making them his guides, confident that their own situation occupied them too fully to allow of likelihood of them heeding another man, though he were almost at their heels.

The distance was not great; by daylight a man should travel it in fifteen minutes. Yet twice that length of

time passed before the two who led the way reached the bridge.

Within the squat stone hut La Güera, shrinking as far back from the others as the confines of the four walls allowed, dropped down upon a seat in a corner and buried her white face in trembling hands. She was near swooning from very weariness and utter hopelessness. Never had she endured such tormentingly long hours in the saddle, the long hard ride from the Blue Smokes to Nacional, the agony of other long hours from Nacional to this place of horrors. For place of horrors and nothing else was it to her. Here Blondino abrogated the last vestige of pretense toward mere humanity.

And Blondino was not all! There were others in the world then of Blondino's sort, others no less abhorrent. The old woman? La Güera had run to her at first sight only to shrink back shuddering. An old hag with small evil blue eyes flecked with red, with fangs like an animal, who only snarled at her and jeered at her and broke out into cackling, derisive laughter as the girl's fear widened her eyes. A foul, terrible creature, who called Blondino her son! Who, as the girl saw her better, and came closer to her, became toad-like, offensive—actually noisome. Mother and son, with some strange, distorted, sympathetic understanding between them. They cursed each other, yet she always called him son, and he always named her mother, and through their rough talk ran a vein of hateful jocosity.

Nor were they all, this hideous mother and son. There was that other—animal, Zambo. An inhuman, shuddersome monster, for no man could be so repellent. Taller than most men, as tall as Blondino himself, by no means so broad and heavy, yet reeking with physical power;

a white man with eyes like a white rabbit's, with the gross flat features of a full-blooded negro. He did not speak, but his dumb lips writhed in grins which terrified her, and his rolling eyes spoke for him. He could not hear a sound, yet he understood every word that was said! He, more than the others, made the place uncanny. He watched Blondino's lips when the master spoke; he got the meaning before the words were half done. She tried not to look at him, yet against her will her eyes followed him. From the waist up this man was naked, save for his improvised *serape;* a bright red blanket, with a hole through the middle for his head, draped his tall, gaunt form. An enormous straw hat, with broken, drooping brim hanging down about his pasty face, topped the whole of the scarecrow. He was all the time laughing horribly, never a whisper of sound issuing from the thick, gross lips, yet his silent laughter making itself felt.

As it grew dark Blondino demanded candles, and the old woman cursed him loud and long for forgetting to bring them. He railed back at her, asking her what time he had had on this trip of his to think of such things. He had brought her something to drink; something to eat, too. Would she hold her tongue? Why hadn't she, like good old Zambo there, been born tongueless? So they built the fire up in the big fireplace, which smoked fearfully; smoke and sputtering firelight and the growing dark made the place an inferno of tortured shadows, stirring like souls in torment.

La Güera ate only because the old hag pulled and plucked and pinched at her first denial of hunger; she drank a half-cup of strong black coffee and shrank back to her corner followed by the woman's jeers, the albino's bestial eyes, and Blondino's careless laughter.

"Go out and get wood," Blondino commanded when the fire burned low.

Zambo went out and Blondino stepped to the fireplace. Over the rough mantel was a bit of mirror. He took it down and stooped to what scant light there was, openly admiring himself. He took off his hat, and with a small pocket comb touched the curling, blond ringlets above his broad white brow. His eyes brightened; he straightened and inflated his broad chest. He spoke angrily again about the lack of candles. When he set the mirror away it was lingeringly. Had there been better light he would have stood longer looking at himself.

Zambo returned with a meager handful of fuel; up here on the cliffs there was little enough of it to be had, and Zambo brought his faggots from the hollow only when necessity drove. But Blondino did not notice; he had turned to the old woman, saying carelessly:

"Frisk the little lady for what she's got on her. She may have a bank-note or two; if so, they're yours, mother. She may have a certain paper; Kid French thought she had. If so I'd like to run an eye over it in a leisurely moment. Remember little Monkey Perrigo? Well, he's dead now. And he was always scribbling things down."

La Güera thought that she had done with any further dread. But to lose Pedro Perrigo's confession! It was all that she had to link La Güera with Juana Castañares— Here came the old woman, all eagerness, both hands lifted to begin a pleasant task. Blondino, lolling against the chimney, was laughing; the white negro, squatting on the hearth, showed his enormous chalky teeth in his widest grin. She leaped up and plucked her treasure from her bosom; a bit of folded paper, and with it the few bank-notes which Blondino suspected her of having, tied up in a handkerchief. She

flung them in frightened haste to the threatening hands.

Blondino took the paper and looked at it by the firelight. His face went black with rage. He had not read it all, the scrawl was none too legible, the light all inadequate, but he made out its portent before he thrust it into his pocket.

"Listen, girl," he said angrily. "I can guess pretty well what's in this, though I'll make sure of it all in the morning. Little cowards like Perrigo are always obsessed with ideas of confessions; pah! If I had him here, alive, I'd wring his neck. Well, he's done for, and he leaves his sting in this, does he? But, as it happens, it makes no difference; I've got it. What's more— So, you know now who you are?" he ended, sneering at her.

She nodded when she saw that he was going to force an answer. And he laughed.

"And that makes no difference! I've sent for a priest; you know that? And you know why?"

She tried to implore him to have pity, but the old woman's cackling at her cut her short, and Blondino spoke up again as though she had not lifted her voice. But this time she stemmed his words, leaping to her feet, crying out desperately:

"You can force no marriage on me! I'll die first. Oh, I'll die gladly, thanking God—"

"You think you will?" he mocked her.

He looked sideways at Zambo. The albino, who had been lounging before the fire more like a dog than a man, rolled over, was for a moment more animal-like than ever as he rose on hands and knees, then surged up to his feet and came toward her. As he came he drew a knife from under the folds of his gay red blanket. He stood before her grinning, running the long sharp edge over a thumb-nail. He looked to his master, who

only stared back at him as though in mildly interested curiosity. So Zambo drew nearer; with a sudden gesture he put one big hand to her head, forcing it back, while with the other he brought the knife nearer and nearer the white throat—

Nearer and nearer it came. A scream of terror broke from her.

"That will do, Zambo, for the present," said Blondino, and the grinning negro, looking well pleased with himself, drew back. But still he held his knife in his hand and again began drawing the thin edge over a big thumbnail.

"You see?" laughed Blondino. "'Never say die'; that's a fine motto! Easier said than done, eh? Here's another: 'Never give up the ship.' Oh, I'm full up with cheery slogans! We'll add this one: 'While there's life, there's hope.'"

"Hope!" cried the girl tremulously. "What hope do you leave me?"

"All in the world! If I said that you were being held for ransom, then what? See that door in the corner? Back of it is a nice little room with iron bars across the window; more than one man has spent his time patiently in there, waiting for ransom negotiations to be completed to my satisfaction. Now, would you pay a little ransom, and go free?"

She wondered if the man had gone mad! Oh, this was just his brutal mockery. What had she to ransom herself with? He answered the unspoken question swiftly.

"You know that you are not just La Güera Perrigo, a nobody, but Señorita Juana Castañares, a very wealthy heiress? Would you sign certain papers and jump at the chance? Would you give every acre of land you

own—or will own—in the world, to go unharmed of Blondino and his merry men?"

She gasped out her eagerness to accede to the suggestion. Oh, make haste with the papers and let her go!

"First the priest," said Blondino.

She had started forward impulsively and now shrank back into her shadowy corner.

"There are reasons," he went on coolly, "and you shall have them. Were you, Juana Castañares, to sign those papers, making certain rich gifts to me, in time there would be talk of compulsion, coercion—all of which means force and prepares the way for legal quibbling later on, and perhaps of nullifying our little deal. But if this Juana Castañares marries of her own free will, as a good father priest will testify, and thereafter does the natural thing of putting her properties into her husband's name so that he may be in a position to manage them to the best advantage for her—there you have another sort of thing which I chance to prefer. Understand?"

But she shook her head, afraid of him and trusting to no promise that would ever come from his mouth.

"You would lie to me!"

"Gladly, if necessary, or, let us say, if advisable," he agreed lightly. "But there is no need, so I tell you the truth. Was it a lie that my good Zambo would use his knife if I just nodded to him? Now listen to every word." And of a sudden he was very stern. "I am on the run at last. I've known for years that the time would come when the only healthy thing for Victor Blondino to do would be to tuck his tail between his legs and run for it. For something that happened in the Blue Smokes I'm going to have, not alone your precious friend Hawk, but a hundred other men hot on my trail.

Well, I'm ready to go; go fast and go far. And I don't want to waste time with a fool of a girl."

He came a sudden step closer; both big hands at his sides were clenched, knuckles showing white.

"You go through a wedding ceremony to-night; immediately thereafter I go to a place where I keep certain things, papers and other things, in readiness for to-night. You sign what is put before you. Then you tuck your hand into the good priest's arm—and the two of you may go to the devil for aught of me. If you object to that—"

"Well?" she asked swiftly, her eyes lifted to his as she tried to hide something of the fear she felt.

"In that case I'm not going to have the padre running around telling tales. Zambo will run his knife across the priest's throat, and you shall watch! It will be, and you will know and remember, quite as though your little fingers held the knife, for your crying out against the wedding is to be Zambo's signal to get busy. Makes you sick to think of it, eh?" he taunted her. "Well, I'm not through. Having exterminated your priest, I'll send hot haste for another. Meanwhile you'll go into the room with the iron bars to wait. And Zambo shall wait there with you, your guard—and friend. I think when priest number two comes you'll be eager for the form of marriage."

She was white to the lips. One look into his face, one wild glance toward that grinning monstrosity, Zambo, told her that one man was in deadly earnest, while the other, like a bloodhound in leash, waited only his master's signal.

"If—I—go through the form of-of marrying you—"

Again Blondino laughed at her.

"Behold the groom!" he chuckled, and flung out an

arm toward Zambo. "For you see, Señorita Juana Castañares, Blondino is using his brain to-night, even against the dictates of his heart! I am on the run, as I have told you. My Zambo, sweet, innocent soul, is not. You will wed with him; you will sign over the lands to him, your devoted husband, and he, all in due order and for value received, will transfer the lands to another man whom I have in mind, so that in due course and when I am ready they will be at my disposal. Are all these legally inspired twists and turns quite clear now?"

The old woman caught him by the sleeve, tugging warningly.

"Sh! Be at an end of your little pranks, my son. There is some one coming."

"Quick, then," said Blondino sharply. "It is the priest. The girl is to go into the jail-room until I've had a few words with him."

Half fainting, La Güera was led to a narrow door and thrust into a tiny room.

"Remember," whispered Blondino, "that you are free to call out—if you dare! An outcry, a bit of hysterics, is a signal to Zambo. It is like calling into his ear: 'Go cut the priest's throat, my pretty Zambo; then come share my prison with me!'"

She heard the door slam; a key turned in the lock. She ran to the small window and shook the heavy iron bars passionately.

Outside she heard stumbling steps. "Have a care, Padre; we are there now."

Involuntarily she started to call out to him. She clapped both hands to her mouth and leaned against the wall to keep from falling. Her voice, though lifted in supplication, was to be a signal—a double signal! She shuddered and clutched again at the bars, trying

to steady herself. She pressed her face against them, breathing deep of the cool, fresh, clean night air. Oh, only to be out there—free—

She heard voices in the main room. Blondino, all affability, was greeting the priest. Snatches of talk. After a while the priest laughed at something said by Blondino, whose good humor began to grow contagious. A cup of wine? Some hot coffee instead? Mention of to-night's business. The groom there, the tall fellow in the red blanket; would that the light were better so that you could see him grin! It is a good fellow, this Zambo, Father. Yes; the girl is in there, in the next room. Shy —you know! They laughed again; Zambo's laugh, though silent, joined theirs; the old hag cackled merrily. More snatches of talk. Blondino leading conversation this way and that. He was leaving the country; but he would give these two a little nuptial gift before he went. In a place which he would go to as soon as the ceremony was performed he kept some pretty trinkets; such as a zambo and his lady-love would like. Then, too, he'd give them his blessing. Oh, be sure the Church was not going to be forgotten. Trust Blondino to-night for handsome presents all round. Candles? Unfortunately there were none; the bride would be glad, *no?* The friendly dark was the very thing for a bride's blushes! Look how the good Zambo grins! Even in this flickering firelight you can feel him beaming! No, the poor fellow cannot hear and cannot speak—yet he understands everything. And he has a way, all his own, of making himself understood.

Blondino's voice rose. He repeated:

"Yes, Zambo with a gesture conveys much meaning!"

They laughed again. Then still further snatches of talk.

And then there was a voice whispering! She did not know whence this voice came; she could not understand. Her heart was pounding so, it was so hard to breathe, her brain was on fire. Yet there was a voice whispering softly:

"La Güera! La Güera!"

It was right at her ear; it came through the window. A hand slipped through the bars and touched her hand. The voice spoke again, very softly.

"Listen, La Güera—"

It was Julian Hawk! She cried out and thrust her two hands out to him.

"Save me! Oh, save me, señor—"

"Sh! Be still. They must not know. If they heard you call you must pretend—say you were frightened—a rat. Sh! No; they have heard nothing—"

"And you will save me?" She was clinging desperately to his two hands as though she would draw him in to her, as though she would pull herself through the bars to him.

"Yes. But as best I can; in my own time, in my own way. From the ceremony if possible—at any rate, from anything beyond that. No matter what happens, *do not call out to me until I come of my own will.* There is something; I must know where Blondino— Sh! Do what he tells you. I will be near."

Then steps coming to her door. The hands were gone from the window. The door was opening. The old woman stood there beckoning while Blondino called out jestingly:

"Come, señorita who would become señora! The father is here, the bridegroom waits. Zambo, go get wood for our fire. Hurry, man; it is for your bridal candle! Mother, bring the señorita to make her bow to

the padre. And bring a bottle of wine from the kitchen. Father, this is little Juana Castañares—"

"Castañares! Juana Castañares—"

"Oh, not of the Castañares of Nacional," laughed Blondino. "This one is a sheep herder's daughter; she comes from the south slopes of these mountains. An orphan, poor little thing; that is why I am so glad, before I go, to see her wedded to the good Zambo. She lost her mother and father with the smallpox. But she is going to gain a fine husband. One who will never hear a word said against her, since he hears nothing; who will never lift his voice to rail at her, since he has no voice! Rare qualities—eh, Father?"

They laughed again.

"Zambo is a long time picking up a handful of sticks," chuckled Blondino. "Shy bride and shyer groom! Father, this has been a hard trip for you; that I know. But I am going to give five hundred pesos to you for the Church to-night! That will help a little, eh? One glass of this really first-rate wine? Ah, here comes the tardy groom! Ready, father? *Ready, señorita?*"

La Güera stood like one in a trance. She hoped at every sound that it was Hawk coming. When she saw Zambo's red blanket and battered straw hat instead of the form she prayed for, a moan broke from her white lips. So she drew to herself and held all eyes, Blondino's the hardest and brightest of all.

"A maid's pretty hesitation at the last minute," he said a trifle sharply, "must be suffered at times, but not to-night. I am in a very great haste, Father. They are ready; let this thing be rushed through."

"My son, this is a matter which—"

"I know, I know," muttered Blondino impatiently.

"But this time there is great need for haste. I am hours behind my time, waiting for these two! If you will only hasten, Father, I will make my gift to the Church a full thousand pesos! Zambo, drop your wood and step up. *Señorita—are you ready?*" He paused significantly; he added with greater significance: "The slightest signal from you—"

The priest was on his feet. After all, the big blond giant appeared to be doing the generous thing by these two, a zambo and a sheep herder's daughter; and he was promising to do well for the Church. A man of importance evidently, who said that he had already lost precious hours—

"My son—my daughter—"

La Güera, with the icy hand of fear at her heart, came forward slowly. She shuddered as Zambo's red blanket brushed her arm. She fancied a hand under it gripping a knife. She heard Hawk's whispered words echoing through her brain: He would save her—she must not call out—she must do what Blondino commanded—but in the end he would save her—

She mumbled responses.

"You'll have to take Zambo's nod for his yes, Father," Blondino reminded the priest.

Nods—faint answers from La Güera—the priest blessed them, naming them man and wife. She reeled and sank to the floor, her face in her hands, sobbing wildly—

Even now at every instant she harkened for Hawk's step. Blondino was of a sudden very brusque. The man who had brought the priest here and who all the while had stood gawking was ordered to return with him immediately as far as the men's camp in the hollow. Blon-

dino fairly thrust them forth. The gift to the Church? Blondino promised it should be given; he didn't have the money in his pocket, did he? Yet before morning it would be sent down to the camp.

The priest was hustled out; at his heels went Blondino, calling back to those behind to guard La Güera well, as he would be gone ten minutes. Ten terrible, endless minutes, during which the shadows thickened in the room, the coals a pale glimmer in the fireplace. Then Blondino returned. He carried an iron box in both hands. He put it down on the table and drew his chair up. The box, opened, revealed several buckskin bags, heavy with gold. There were papers and there were tight rolls of bank-notes.

"To-night Victor Blondino draws on his bank," he laughed triumphantly. "Here, girl; fill your eyes with this. Here are documents saved all these years that, did the time ever come when it might be required to prove that La Güera Perrigo was none other than Juana Castañares, the thing could be done. Those papers I keep a while longer. Here is another paper, long ago prepared; you will sign this, and then I will go!"

He thrust the paper to her, and she signed, hastening to get it done. He had promised that that was all that he wanted of her.

"You have deeded your lands," he mocked her, "to your most estimable husband. La Güera Castañares, bride to a zambo!" He sat back and roared with laughter. "And now, my good Zambo, millionaire for a minute, you will sign this other paper. You can write your name at least; else I had chosen some other to stand in your shoes to-night. Sign here."

The form enwrapped in the red blanket drew the

paper across the table and took the pen. There was a quick signature set down, and the paper was shoved back under Blondino's eyes. He looked down at it—and with a great roar surged to his feet. For what he read on the line where he had just seen the pen moving was:

"Julian Hawk."

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN THE MOON ROSE—

"Down!" shouted Hawk, and in such a tone that Blondino, with the muzzle of a revolver two feet from his amazed face, sank back into his chair without a word. Only the width of a narrow table was between them at last—and Julian Hawk held the whip-hand.

"La Güera," Hawk said crisply, "come here; quick. There's a knife in my belt; rip this blanket off my back."

For a moment she could not move. It was Julian Hawk; just now it had been the albino! She was wedded, not to the albino, but to Julian Hawk!

"Quick!" he repeated sharply, and she ran to him then and found the knife with fumbling fingers and freed him of the red blanket. He tossed off the old, battered hat with a quick jerk of the head. "Steady, Blondino! Strange enough, I don't want your blood on my hands to-night—unless you ask for a quick end." To the old woman who stood speechless and stupefied, he said sternly: "Sit down. That chair at Blondino's back."

She obeyed, mute in consternation, and rubbed her eyes and stared harder than ever.

"Both hands on the table, Blondino," Hawk commanded, and, again, such was the quality of his voice, such the steady insistence of a revolver within a few inches of Blondino's face, he had ready obedience. "Now I am going to tell you a thing or two; better listen, as I'll make it short, and I won't repeat. First, don't expect your Zambo; he's lying quite still outside where I

hit him over the head with the same rifle that he used this morning to kill the Indian boy at the watering trough. It's just the two of us now, and I'm taking no chances with you. Move either hand, and you'll be making the little signal asking for a bullet square between the eyes."

He paused and for a moment looked thoughtfully into those two blazing blue eyes.

"Seven years ago," he said presently, "you and your gang made a clean-up way down in Sonora when you robbed and murdered your way to a good many thousand dollars at the Cinco Palos Mine. My mine that, though you and I didn't know each other then. You staged the play while I was away. You knew we were our own bankers. You killed three friends of mine. You left Charlie Bell what he is to-day, broke, bed-ridden, and sour. You rode off, heavy with gold, and at least Charlie Bell has always thought that I was the one who profited. I've been looking for you for those seven years; for you and the place where you kept your loot. So I got my name of Captain Colorado, and became a highwayman myself—but always robbing other highwaymen like you, always hoping to come in time to the right man. Then I came up with Chavez, the Squirrel!"

Blondino's big body twitched through many coördinating muscles; he gathered himself as though to spring.

"Steady!" Hawk warned him, and Blondino sighed deeply and relaxed, only his eyes moving, eyes aglint with murderous lights.

"You killed Perrigo the other night," Hawk went on coldly. "I did not shoot you then; it was too late, and I wanted you alive—and here! But an autopsy will show the crushed skull, and you can swing for that. You killed Parmalee and shot Tom March; by now they have

identified the gun with the two empty shells as yours. Yet I was the man who turned you loose—and followed you! Maybe you can guess why?"

For the first time Blondino spoke. He affected to sneer.

"You want money? Well, there is money here—"

"You are the man who, years ago, massacred the Castañares family, leaving Castañares himself what he is, saving only one little girl, planning even then to come at the whole property through her if other means failed. For that, as for Parmalee's death, you can swing, Blondino!"

Blondino wet his lips.

"If it is a question of money—"

"I learned from Chavez that somewhere you had your strong box. Through twenty years of robbery you have put away— Just how much, Blondino?"

Blondino laughed now and again, filled his lungs, and shoved the iron box forward. But Hawk's eyes did not waver, nor did the steel menace in his hands.

"You cleaned the Cinco Palos Mine of over thirty thousand dollars. One strike, that, out of twenty years! In your box there should be two or three hundred thousand dollars. Now, do as you are told. There is a pen, Blondino; take it up. *Damn you, take it up!* Ah! Now make a memorandum; write at the very beginning, 'I, Victor Blondino, also known as Jake Blondine, hereby make restitutions as follows:'—Oh, I'll want it signed at the end, too; but best begin that way, in case of accidents before you are through!—First, to Charlie Bell; ten thousand, actual loss; ten thousand by way of interest; ten thousand more as a small token of regret that you broke him physically. That's thirty thousand to Charlie Bell."

Blondino's face grew red, and from red went to a sick and congested purple. But he wrote. Sweat rolled down his face, his muscles rippled, and bunched, and twitched—yet he wrote.

"To the heirs of Andy Moran, thirty thousand," said Hawk. "To the heirs of Billy Thompson, thirty thousand. To the heirs of Happy Taylor, thirty thousand. I'll even ask you to tie up the packets of money; if I've over-called your hand we'll make a revised memorandum. A confession in two lines that you robbed and murdered the Castañares family. Restitution there, too; confession that you cheated Castañares of the Hacienda, to which you'll waive all claim. Oh, you come clean to-night, Blondino!"

Blondino, who had been in many a tight corner in his life, knew full well that the best a man could hope for at a crisis like this was to gain time. Given time, anything might happen. So he wrote very slowly, but he wrote.

"La Güera," said Hawk, "it is getting too dark in here. Will you put the rest of the sticks on the fire?"

She hurried to the fireplace. The old woman, sagging in her chair, stirred for the first time and began shrilling vituperation. Hawk ignored her, merely lifting his voice to command:

"And the thousand pesos you promised the priest—"

Just then a voice startled them all, a voice from an eager man at the open doorway, shouting:

"Make him add sixteen hundred bones he owes me for that fifty-gallon barrel—"

Chancy Burns! And two men with him, the three crowding in at the door. Bud Bell—and Kid French.

"We heard you," cried Bud Bell. "Hawk, I apologize;

for me and Charlie, both. Kid French here led us straight—

Kid French leaped forward and became screaming curses.

"You double-crossing hound—"

As Blondino jumped up, Kid French from close range started shooting. Hawk leaped on him and struck him to the floor. But already Blondino had slipped from his chair—

Only now did the old woman move. She ran to where Blondino lay and threw herself upon the still body; her old hands went wandering over the handsome face; she fell to moaning inarticulately.

"Come," said Hawk hurriedly and caught La Güera's hand. "Let us go out. We have finished here."

He led her to the door and out into the cool, fresh, clean night. She went falteringly and clung to him, who had kept his word to her, who had saved her and was lifting her out of a life of horror into some other life which, like the open night, was to be sweet and clean—and without fear. It began to seem to her that, among men, he stood forth like that tower of rock in the Little Mesa country, the Sentinel of the Desert.

"I had to let the marriage go on, La Güera mia," he said softly. "It was the only way, to make restitution to those others. And you know—it has always troubled me—"

"What?" she asked, wondering.

"That that first night at the Hacienda Escondida I was so rude when you suggested— Remember, La Güera?" and she knew that he was smiling.

"Oh!" she cried.

They stood together looking out over the brooding

solitudes. The moon had not yet risen; the night was softly glorious with stars. Down in the hollow, far below, several fires blazed away merrily; in the shifting light numbers of men moved about. Bud Bell and Kid French and Chancy Burns had not ridden alone; fully forty riders, rushing southward from the Blue Smokes, had trickled across the border in pursuit of the man who had shot Tom March.

"We'll go back to Nacional," said Hawk, after a long silence. "We'll stop there for Señor Castañares; then the three of us will ride on to the Little Mesa country. I'm going to buy that ranch there. We've got to plan—Do you think we can work things out, La Güera?"

When the moon rose gloriously over the Sudden Mountains they had already taken a first long step; a step toward working things out, as Hawk put it; a step toward happiness.

THE END

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GROSSET & DUNLAP, Publishers, NEW YORK